



POETRY & LIFE

COWPER & HIS POETRY

POETRY & LIFE SERIES

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William Couper

COWPER & HIS POETRY

BY

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Literature in the University of St.
Andrews



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GENERAL PREFACE

A GLANCE through the pages of this little book will suffice to disclose the general plan of the series of which it forms a part. Only a few words of explanation, therefore, will be necessary.

The point of departure is the undeniable fact that with the vast majority of young students of literature a living interest in the work of any poet can best be aroused, and an intelligent appreciation of it secured, when it is immediately associated with the character and career of the poet himself. The cases are indeed few and far between in which much fresh light will not be thrown upon a poem by some knowledge of the personality of the writer, while it will often be found that the most direct—perhaps even the only—way to the heart of its meaning lies through a consideration of the circumstances in which it had its birth. The purely æsthetic critic may possibly object that a poem should be regarded simply as a self-contained and detached piece of art, having no personal affiliations or bearings. Of the validity of this as an abstract principle nothing need now be said. The fact remains that, in the earlier stages of study at any rate, poetry is most valued and loved when it is made to seem most human and vital; and the human and vital interest of poetry can be most surely brought home to the reader by the biographical method of interpretation.

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This is to some extent recognized by writers of histories and text-books of literature, and by editors of selections from the works of our poets ; for place is always given by them to a certain amount of biographical material. But in the histories and text-books the biography of a given writer stands by itself, and his work has to be sought elsewhere, the student being left to make the connexion for himself ; while even in our current editions of selections there is little systematic attempt to link biography, step by step, with production.

This brings us at once to the chief purpose of the present series. In this, biography and production will be considered together and in intimate association. In other words, an endeavour will be made to interest the reader in the lives and personalities of the poets dealt with, and at the same time to use biography as an introduction and key to their writings.

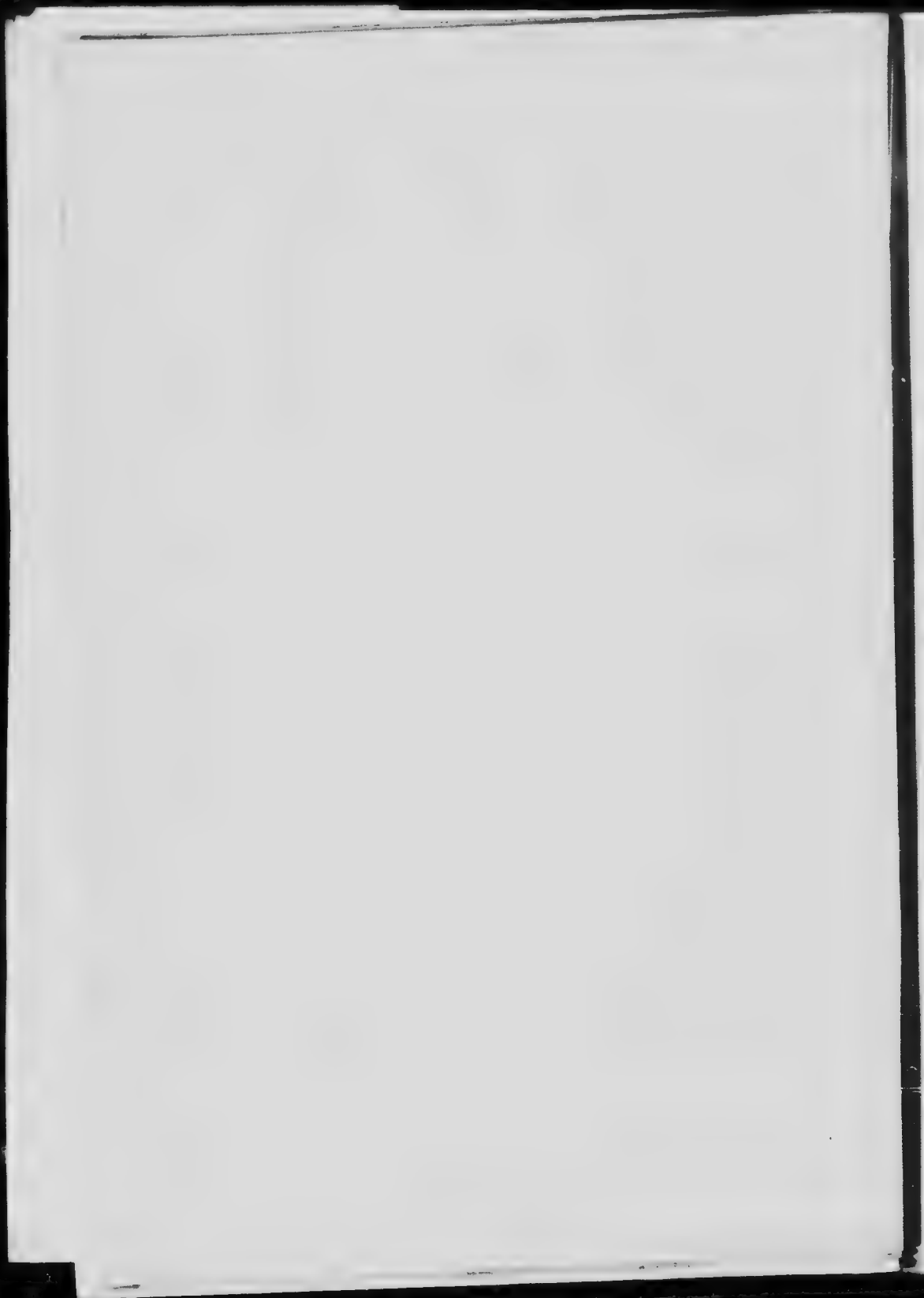
Each volume will therefore contain the life-story of the poet who forms its subject. In this, attention will be specially directed to his personality as it expressed itself in his poetry, and to the influences and conditions which counted most as formative factors in the growth of his genius. This biographical study will be used as a setting for a selection, as large as space will permit, of his representative poems. Such poems, where possible, will be reproduced in full, and care will be taken to bring out their connexion with his character, his circumstances, and the movement of his mind. Then, in

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addition, so much more general literary criticism will be incorporated as may seem to be needed to supplement the biographical material, and to exhibit both the essential qualities and the historical importance of his work.

It is believed that the plan thus pursued is substantially in the nature of a new departure, and that the volumes of this series, constituting as they will an introduction to the study of some of our greatest poets, will be found useful to teachers and students of literature, and no less to the general lover of English poetry.

WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON



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MORE than thirty years after Cowper's death, Macaulay, turning aside for the moment from graver work, drew a thumb-nail sketch of the "gentle, shy, melancholy Calvinist, whose spirit had been broken by fagging at school . . . and whose favourite associates were a blind old lady and an evangelical divine." The portrait is apt, but not wholly just ; it contains the germ of truth, but is not wholly truthful ; it is apposite but inadequate ; it conveys an unfair impression of weakness and insignificance ; it belittles the poet's capacity. The recluse of Olney was destined to play an important rôle in his century—to share in the quickening of its religious life, to aid in no uncertain manner in the regeneration of its poetry. He was to witness the overthrow of an apparently unassailable school and the establishing of a new order of things. In the hands of Pope, with his fundamental premise that the proper study of mankind was man, poetry degenerated into a mere intellectual exercise, brilliant literary satire, epigrammatic exposition of the neo-classic creed. This school had closed its doors on nature. James Thomson (who owed more to Allan Ramsay than he ever acknowledged), who threw open the wickets of the trim little gardens of the south, claimed :

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I solitary court

Th' inspiring breeze, and meditate the book

Of Nature ever open, aiming thence

Warm from the heart to pour the mortal song ;

and as the coldness of intellectualism vanishes a new note of human sympathy steals into poetry. Crabbe, in revolt against the idealism of Goldsmith, depicts scenes of sordid misery with minute pencil ; in Cowper the bitter cry of the slave rises heavenward. The devotional spirit, crushed in an age of reason and free inquiry, revives. Experimental religion is restored to its place ; poetry becomes once more passionate and personal. The flame of religion, fanned by the zeal of the Revival, bursts again into full passion and vigour in the pathos and the personal note of the Olney Hymns and "The Task."

Born in an age whose vices are generally held to outweigh its virtues, and whose defects appear the more glaring in the light of nineteenth-century idealism, Cowper, turn whither he might, could find little ground for satisfaction in its survey. Religion and morals had reached a very low ebb ; irreligion and indifference had permeated all classes of society ; rare gleams of spiritual light illuminated the arid wastes of reason and common sense. The Church stood degraded in the eyes of a people which had largely cast off all forms of religious belief ; it groaned under a burden of abuse that crippled and annulled its spiritual activity ; it was cursed by the absence of its incumbents

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and the utter neglect of their cures. The upper clergy—redeemed from absolute contempt by a Butler or a Bentley—were largely agnostic, preferment-hunters, theological controversialists; the lower ignorant, drunken, and poverty-stricken. An immense and impassable gulf separated the episcopal palace from the thatched cottage of the parish priest, the prelate in magnificent equipage from the curate slouching along in tattered cassock from his garret lodging, willing to preach for a shilling and a dinner or to read prayers for twopence and a cup of coffee. The magnificent moral force of Puritanism was expended. It was succeeded by the "cold, passionless and prudential theology of the eighteenth century." Christianity was reduced to a mere moral system; outwardly, religion had shrivelled and died.

The prints of Hogarth mirror the licence of the age; its shameless Beer streets and Gin lanes; the riotousness of its elections; its bribing agents; its drunken divines; its brutal cockpits; its fetid prisons; its barbarous mad-houses; its abominable whipping-posts; its degrading pillories. The playhouse was sadly degenerate. The Comic Muse, grown old and dull and unattractive and lonely, had ceased to appeal to her public. Her voice was cracked and broken; her ribald jests grown stale; her songs tasteless, her joints stiff, her finery faded. Nor was her sister Tragedy in better plight. Her voice, too, had died away to a whisper and her skill was sadly feeble. Imitations of

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the "Tatler" and "Spectator" papers provided ample scope for the creative energies of writers. Richardson, who regarded himself as a moral reformer, and taught, as Johnson said, "the passions to move at the command of virtue," had not yet appeared to set the ladies weeping with his sentimentalism; or Fielding, "conversant with every kind of character, from the minister at his levee to the bailiff in his sponging-house, from the duchess at her drum to the landlady behind her bar." When Cowper was a boy at Westminster, crowds made holiday visiting Bedlam; whither he too found his way, "not altogether insensible of the misery of the poor captives nor destitute of feeling for them." The Universities were deeply imbued with the prevailing spirit of materialism. Chesterfield in "A Modern Conversation" sketches his academic friend, who, having resided long in college, had contracted "the laziness, the soaking, the pride, and the pedantry of the cloister." With Oxford Adam Smith was unfavourably impressed, and Jeffrey, later, bitterly lamented the hours wasted in the southern University. The social barriers were sharply drawn and unsurmountable. When her Grace of Buckingham was invited by Lady Huntingdon to hear honest Whitefield, she declared the doctrines to be repulsive and disrespectful—that it was "monstrous to be told you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth"; that such teaching was highly offensive and insulting, and "utterly at variance

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with high rank and good breeding." Yet her ladyship's favourite numbered in his audience, at one time or another, such men of intellect and fashion as the Earl of Chatham; Bubb Doddington, at whose seat at Eastbury Young met Voltaire; Charles Townshend; Horace Walpole; the Earl of Chesterfield; Frederick, Prince of Wales; her Grace of Cumberland, and a hundred others, among the best and the worst in the land. By this time a mighty religious revival was in progress; fashionable irreligion and popular vices were being assailed by the fiery eloquence of the evangelical preacher, and the firm citadels of respectable ecclesiasticism shaken to their very foundations.

"Few books," Southey declared, "have made more religious enthusiasts than the 'Serious Call' of quietist William Law." Therefrom, acknowledged John Wesley, sprang the seed of Methodism. Wesley organized his societies, instructed his itinerants, laboured untiringly among the masses. Whitefield, insolent in censure, magnificent in presence, held his hearers thrall'd by the power of his dramatic eloquence, his voice bearing like the blast of doom on men's consciences. "The new sect pretending to the very strictest piety" encountered bitter opposition; but Hogarth employed his pen in vain caricature, her Grace of Buckingham penned unavailing words of bitterness. There was leavening of the masses, and the Methodists, after bitter revilement and scorn—will they, nill they?—must out from the

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bosom of the Church into the cloud-laden uncertainty of Dissent. The Calvinist Evangelicals, earnest ministers living out their lives in dull parishes, plain Churchmen—Hervey, by whose "Meditations" Johnson set little store; peaceful Venn, who gave the "Complete Duty of Man" to the world; austere Romaine; sturdy John Newton; earnest Thomas Scott, wrestling with Burnet and Hooker on "Justification"—fearlessly announced the coming of God to the soul. The spark of religion leapt into flame, dazzling, blinding, illuminating the darkness of the land. Life gathered afresh within the bosom of the Church; the public conscience was awakened, men's hearts were opened. They set themselves to cleanse the abominable dens dignified by the name of prisons; they faced the problem of the education of the illiterate masses; civic interests claimed attention; Wilberforce raised unceasing appeal on behalf of the slaves; while Sheridan and Burke dazzled with their eloquence in the cause of Nuncomar.

II

BORN on November 26, 1731, at the Rectory, Berkhamstead, William Cowper came of excellent stock on both sides of the family. His father, with good Jacobite blood in his veins, who, be it marked, wrote verses himself—eccentric John Cowper, D.D., chaplain to George II—was son to Spencer Cowper, judge of the Common Pleas, and a great-

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uncle was Whig Chancellor to Anne and George I. His mother, Anne Donne, who traced back her descent to Henry III, numbered the poet among her ancestors. Years later,¹ when fast descending into the vale, Cowper wrote to his cousin, Mrs. Bodham, wife of the rector of Mattishall, in acknowledgment of the miniature in oils of his mother by Heims: "There is in me, I believe, more of the Donne than of the Cowper; and though I love all of both names, and have a thousand reasons to love those of my own name, yet I feel the bond of nature draw me vehemently to your side. . . . Add to this, I deal much in poetry, as did our venerable ancestor the Dean of St. Paul's, and I think I shall have proved myself a Donne at all points."

When he was six years of age his mother died, but the impression made by her personality remained ineffaceable during life. "The world," he continues in the letter from which we have just quoted, "could not have furnished you with a present so acceptable to me as the picture you have so kindly sent me. I received it the night before last and viewed it with a trepidation of nerves and spirits, somewhat akin to what I should have felt had the dear original presented herself to my embraces. . . . I remember, too, a multitude of the maternal tendernesses which I received from her, and which have endeared her memory to me beyond expression." In this spirit he penned the saddest and tenderest lines

¹ February 27, 1790.

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in the language. The recollection of a thousand and one tendernesses moved him to write his exquisite heart-broken verses, where we share with him as in a common sorrow.

Oh that those lips had language ! Life has passed
With me but roughly since I heard thee last.
Those lips are thine—thy own sweet smile I see
The same that oft in childhood solaced me :
Voice only fails, else how distinct they say,
“Grieve not, my child, chase all thy fears
away ! ” . . .

My mother ! when I learnt that thou wast dead,
Say, wast thou conscious of the tears I shed ?
Hovered thy spirit o'er thy sorrowing son,
Wretch even then, life's journey just begun ?
Perhaps thou gavest me, though unfelt, a kiss :
Perhaps a tear, if souls can weep in bliss—
Ah, that maternal smile ! It answers—Yes.
I heard the bell tolled on thy burial day,
I saw the hearse that bore thee slow away,
And, turning from my nursery window, drew
A long, long sigh, and wept a last adieu !
But was it such ?—It was. Where thou art gone
Adieus and farewells are a sound unknown.
May I but meet thee on that peaceful shore,
The parting word shall pass my lips no more !
Thy maidens, grieved themselves at my concern,
Oft gave me promise of thy quick return.
What ardently I wished I long believed,
And, disappointed still, was still deceived.
By expectation every day beguiled,
Dupe of *to-morrow* even from a child.
Thus many a sad to-morrow came and went,
Till, all my stock of infant sorrow spent,
I learnt at last submission to my lot ;

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But, though I less deplored thee, ne'er forgot.

Where once we dwelt our name is heard no more,
Children not thine have trod my nursery floor ;
And where the gardener Robin, day by day,
Drew me to school along the public way,
Delighted with my bauble coach, and wrapped
In scarlet mantle warm, and velvet-capped,
'Tis now become a history little known,
That once we called the pastoral house our own.
Short-lived possession ! but the record fair
That memory keeps, of all thy kindness there,
Still outlives many a storm that has effaced
A thousand other themes less deeply traced.
Thy nightly visits to my chamber made
That thou mightst know me safe and warmly laid ;
Thy morning bounties ere I left my home,
The biscuit, or confectionery plum ;
The fragrant waters on my cheeks bestowed
By thy own hand, till fresh they shone and glowed :
All this, and more endearing still than all,
Thy constant flow of love, that knew no fall,
Ne'er roughened by those cataracts and brakes,
That humour interposed too often makes ;
All this still legible in memory's page,
And still to be so to my latest age,
Adds joy to duty, makes me glad to pay
Such honours to thee as my numbers may ;
Perhaps a frail memorial, but sincere,
Not scorned in heaven, though little noticed here.

Gravely austere in comparison are those lines
of Wordsworth in the "Prelude" :

Such was she—not from faculties more strong
Than others have, but from the times, perhaps,
And spot in which she lived, and through a grace

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Of modest meekness, simple-mindedness,
A heart that found benignity and hope
Being itself benign.

From the darkened home William was sent to Dr. Pitman's boarding-school, seven miles away, where he had the misfortune to experience more than ordinary hardship. Pilloried for all time in this pathetic passage in the "Memoir" stands the abominable bully who made life intolerable for him. "My chief affliction consisted in my being singled out from all the other boys by a lad of about fifteen years of age as a proper object upon whom he might let loose the cruelty of his temper. I choose to conceal the particular recital of the many acts of barbarity with which he made it his business continually to persecute me. It will be sufficient to say that his savage treatment of me impressed such a dread of his figure upon my mind that I well remember being afraid to lift my eyes upon him higher than to his knees, and that I knew him better by his shoe-buckles than by any other part of his dress." From Market Street he was removed in consequence of an affection of the eyes, and boarded at the house of a Mr. Disney, an oculist. After treatment there, he was sent at the age of ten to Westminster School, then under the headship of Dr. Nicholls, where he excelled at cricket and other games and stood in high favour with the master. Life at Westminster was happy enough; he broke bounds occasionally like

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other boys, played trap-and-span-farthing, kept mice, and, as he later lamented, "acquired Latin and Greek at the expense of a knowledge much more important." His Latin tutor was greasy-locked Vincent Bourne, on whom the Duke of Richmond played a scandalous joke, and who, he afterwards declared, was a better Latin poet than Tibullus, Propertius, and Ausonius. "He was so good-natured," the poet wrote, "and so indolent that I lost more than I got by him, for he made me as idle as himself. He was such a sloven, as if he had trusted to his genius as a cloak for everything that could disgust you in his person; and indeed in his writings he has almost made amends for all." Among his fellow-scholars Cowper numbered Warren Hastings (against whom he refused to believe a syllable of evil, when England was set by the ears over the question), Impey, Churchill, admirable Joseph Hill, Lord Dartmouth, Colman, William and Charles Bagot, Dick Sutton, Robert Lloyd (son of Tappy), Bennell Thornton, Sir William Russell (whom the poet so greatly mourned), young Lord Higham-Ferrers (who played off a ludicrous trick on excellent Nicholls, and who fought against the rebels in the '45, when the school was put on its honour to give no offence to the young Jacobites). He wrote English verses after the manner of poets great and small, and Latin elegiacs—

At Westminster, where little poets strive
To set a distich upon six and five,
I was a poet too

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—and was in all probability present at the performance of the "Ignoramus," produced in 1748, when Marmaduke Lewis so distinguished himself.¹ While still at Westminster he made his first acquaintance with his cousin Harriet (afterwards Lady Hesketh), daughter of Ashley Cowper. At Westminster, too, he experienced his first morbid attack. When crossing St. Margaret's Churchyard one evening a skull thrown up by a gravedigger, working by the light of his lanthorn, struck him on the leg. This incident induced a train of melancholy reflections and succeeding lowness of spirits, but the impression speedily passed. He read through the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey," and presently his school-days ran to a close.

When nearly nineteen Cowper was apprenticed to Mr. Chapman, of Ely Place. Thereafter followed the famous three years misspent in an attorney's office, "giggling and making giggle," when we find him making sheep's eyes at a certain young lady—a cousin of his—a Miss Theodora Cowper, daughter of droll little Ashley who lived in Southampton Row. Thither he conducted his fellow-clerk—a hard-working, determined fellow, later Chancellor Thurlow—but in place of grinding away at the law himself he reeled off verses to "Delia," clever enough some of them, which must have highly gratified the young lady in question, but in nowise advanced his prospects in his profession. The law, however, he neglected utterly.

¹ Publications of Cowper Society paper by John Sargeant M.A.

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Among other things he did an excellent sketch,
"Of Himself".

William was once a bashful youth ;
His modesty was such,
That one might say (to say the truth)
He rather had too much.

Howe'er, it happened by degrees,
He mended and grew perter ;
In company was more at ease,
And dressed a little smarter ;

Nay, now and then would look quite gay,
As other people do ;
And sometimes said, or tried to say,
A witty thing or two.

At length, improved from head to heel,
'Twere scarce too much to say,
No dancing bear was so genteel,
Or half so 'dégagé.'

Now that a miracle so strange
May not in vain be shown,
Let the dear maid who wrought the change
E'er claim him for her own.

At twenty-one he was settled in chambers
in the Middle Temple, giving on Pump Court,¹

In a paper by Frederick Rogers, read before the Cowper Society, entitled "Cowper in the Temple," the following description of its precincts occurs: "It was a squalid, slummy Temple on its Alsatian side, with a sprinkling of the disreputable among its inhabitants, and sordid and hideous crimes happened within its borders in that century, though none of note are reported during Cowper's time. Temple Bar still remained a ghastly Golgotha till nearly the end of the century; the last head is said to have fallen into Fleet Street amid screams of disgust from the populace in

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where, a year earlier, Edmund Burke was entered as a student. At 1 Inner Temple Lane Dr. Johnson edited Shakespeare, and close by lived Richardson the novelist.¹ On June 24, 1754, Cowper was called to the Bar. He dined every evening with the Nonsense Club—not wholly nonsensical—all old Westminsters, and some of whom were, alas! already too much given to the bottle—dabbling Bonnell Thornton; George Colman, who translated Terence, and who figured later in our poet's life; poor, drudging, struggling Lloyd, who was only too familiar with the interior of a debtor's prison; solid, sensible Joseph Hill, friend true as steel; Bensley, whose tragedy was very great, and perhaps William de Grey, who ended his days in the peerage. Edward Thurlow, Charles Churchill, and John Wilkes were occasionally of the circle. Cowper contributed at least five papers to the "Connoisseur," a weekly journal started by Colman. Vastly unlike the sad Olney recluse of later life is this Temple dilettante. Thus he describes the milksop Suckling:² "The delicate Billy Suckling is the contempt of the men, the jest of the women, and the darling of his mamma. She doats on him to distraction, and is in perpetual admiration of

¹ 1785. Close by the old Bar stood the famous Devil Tavern, until it made way for Child's Bank in 1788. Its literary reputation began in Ben Jonson's day, and it was a resort of literary men, barristers, and members of the theatrical profession far on into the eighteenth century. But the 'Devil' became disreputable and got on to the down grade before Cowper's time, and if he knew it at all he probably regarded it as a place to be avoided."

² "Cowper in London," p. 24.

³ "The Delicate Billy Suckling," "Connoisseur," No. 111.

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his wit and anxiety for his health. The good young gentleman for his part is neither undutiful nor ungrateful : she is the only woman he does not look on with indifference, and she is his tutoress, his physician, and his nurse. She provides his broth every evening, will not suffer him to look into a book by candlelight lest he should hurt his eyes : and takes care to have his bed warmed—nay, I have known him sit with his mamma's white handkerchief round his neck through a whole evening to guard him from the wind of that *ugly door*, or that *terrible chink* in the wainscot."

On July 9, 1756, Dr. Cowper passed away, and thenceforth the Rectory was no longer home for the son. He realized for the first time that he and "his native place were disconnected for ever," and was stricken mute. Nor was the poignancy of his grief ever softened.

In 1759 the poet removed to the Inner Temple, where he bought chambers for £250, and as his aversion for the law increased his prospects steadily blackened. Time slipped past, friends scattered, his loneliness depressed him, and although he wore a brave front the financial question grew urgent. He became a prey to melancholy, grew morbid and neurotic, gave himself over to endless introspection, and ailed physically. On August 9, 1763, he wrote gloomily to Lady Hesketh : "I am of a very singular temperament, and very unlike all the men I have ever conversed with. Certainly I am not an absolute fool ; but I have more weaknesses

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than the greatest of all the fools I can recollect at present. In short, if I am as fit for the next world as I am unfit for this—and God forbid I should speak it in vanity!—I would not change conditions with any saint in Christendom.” Presently occurred the decisive crisis in his life.

Patronage of the offices of Clerk of the Journals of the House of Lords and of Reading Clerk and Clerk of Committees—now fallen vacant—rested in the hands of a relative, Major Cowper. The last two were offered to our poet and eagerly accepted. But his timid nature shrank from the publicity attaching to these offices. He sought an interchange, and was nominated unwillingly to the Clerkship. Scarce was this done, however, when a party antagonistic to the Cowper interests demanded that the Major's nominee should submit to public examination at the Bar of the House. The anticipated ordeal preyed on a hypersensitive mind; the poet's spirits sank, hallucinations assailed him, despair overwhelmed him. He anticipated madness; and the recollection of an incident which had happened to him when a mere child precipitated the crisis. His father, Dr. Cowper, had put into his hands a treatise in favour of self-murder, and had listened in silence to his reasonings against it. This he now interpreted as implying agreement with the author, and the casual declaration of a chop-house acquaintance in favour of the right to self-murder determined him to that course. He purchased half an ounce of laudanum, and, reading a letter

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in a paper which seemed to bear on his own case, hurried out to effect his purpose in solitude. Scarce had he gone a mile when he conceived the idea of flight to France, a change of religion, and a monastic life ; but in the act of packing he remembered the laudanum and abandoned his fantastic notion. Hindered from taking the fatal step by the dread of interruption in his chambers, he next resolved on drowning ; but, chance intervening in the shape of a porter seated on some goods, he returned in his coach to his chambers, where again he decided to have recourse to laudanum. Seized, however, with sudden revulsion, he hurled the accursed stuff out of the window, and lay for some hours with a penknife directly pointed against his heart, reproaching himself bitterly with his "folly and rank cowardice."¹ An attempt to hang himself on the morning of the ordeal proved all but successful, and had not his garter broken there would have been no further story. His laundress entered his room at the noise of his fall, under the impression that he was seized with a fit, whereupon "I sent to a friend, to whom I related the whole affair, and dispatched him to my kinsman at the coffee-house. As soon as the latter arrived I pointed to the broken garter, which lay in the middle of the room, and apprised him also of the attempt I had been making. His words were : 'My dear Mr. Cowper, you terrify me ! To be sure, you cannot hold the office at this rate. Where is

¹ V. Memoir.

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the deputation ? ' I gave him the key of the drawer where it was deposited, and his business requiring his immediate attendance, he took it away with him, and there ended all my connection with the Parliament office.'"

Now fell the horror of infinite despair. Convinced that he had committed the unpardonable sin, and that the avenging wrath of a righteous God would consume him, he found rest neither by night nor by day. Conviction of doom was unshakable, anguish of soul his continual portion. He dragged out solitary days of gloom, passionate, hopeless hours, and wrote these Sapphics of the lost :

Hatred and vengeance,—my eternal portion,
Scarce can endure delay of execution,—
Wait with impatient readiness to seize my
Soul in a moment.

Damned below Judas ! more abhorred than he was,
Who for a few pence sold his holy Master !
Twice betrayed Jesus me, the last delinquent,
Deems the profanest.

Man disavows, and Deity disowns me,
Hell might afford my miseries a shelter ;
Therefore, Hell keeps her ever hungry mouths all
Bolted against me.

Hard lot ! encompassed with a thousand dangers ;
Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors,
I'm called, if vanquished ! to receive a sentence
Worse than Abiram's.

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Him the vindictive rod of angry Justice
Sent quick and howling to the centre headlong ;
I, fed with judgment in a fleshly tomb, am
Buried above ground.

Argument was unavailing. His brother John¹ arrived from Cambridge, and sought to comfort him. Martin Madan, whose head was "once endued with a legal periwig," then a popular Evangelical preacher, brought a momentary ray of hope to the sufferer's soul ; but he could not dispel the darkness. Madness descended ; the poor derelict was whirled away mercifully to Dr. Cotton's, and for a period all was dark.

Gradually rare gleams of hope alternated with the cloud-drifts of despair. The mild doctor, himself a verse-writer, noticed an improvement, and talked cheerfully with his patient ; he discussed the deep things of the soul, and soon the good seed bore fruit. Reading one day a verse of Scripture, in a moment he "believed and received the Gospel." The mists of doubt and despair rolled away ; he walked in ecstasy and wrote glad verses, and sang the song of deliverance :

The soul, a dreary province once
Of Satan's dark domain,
Feels a new empire formed within,
And owns a heavenly reign.

Hervey's "Meditations," which Lady Hesketh had sent him, gave him infinite pleasure, and

¹ The Rev. John Cowper, Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, since 1763.

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he considered this author "one of the most scriptural writers in the world."

But the Doctor was not deceived by this momentary improvement. Cowper remained under his charge for a twelvemonth longer. On June 7, 1765, deep in his debt, he shook hands with the little physician and set out with his servant, Sam Roberts, whose 'fellow' he never saw, and his *protégé*—Dick Coleman—on a visit to his brother at Cambridge. Presently he was settled in rooms in Huntingdon.

Cowper was now in his thirty-fifth year. All hope of success in his profession had vanished ; his friends, with the exception of Joseph Hill, had forgotten him. To Hill, faithful now in his hour of darkness, amid the shattering of his fortunes, he later dedicated an "Epistle," so repaying his debt in part :

Dear Joseph,—Five and twenty years ago—
Alas ! now time escapes—'tis even so—
With frequent intercourse, and always sweet,
And always friendly we were wont to cheat
A tedious hour, and now we never meet !
As some grave gentleman in Terence says
('Twas therefore much the same in ancient
days),

Good lack, we know not what to-morrow brings—
Strange fluctuation of all human things !
True. Changes will befall, and friends may part,
But distance only cannot change the heart :
And were I called to prove the assertion true,
One proof should serve—a reference to you.

Whence comes it then, that in the wane of life,
Though nothing have occurred to kindle strife,

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We find the friends we fancied we had won,
Though numerous once, reduced to few or none ?
Can gold grow worthless, that has stood the touch ?
No ; gold they seemed, but they were never
such.

Once on a time, an emperor, a wise man,
No matter where, in China or Japan,
Decreed, that whosoever should offend
Against the well-known duties of a friend,
Convicted once, should ever after wear
But half a coat, and show his bosom bare ;
The punishment importing this, no doubt,
That all was naught within, and all found out.
O happy Britain ! we have not to fear
Such hard and arbitrary measures here ;
Else, could a law like that which I relate
Once have the sanction of our triple state,
Some few that I have known in days of old,
Would run most dreadful risk of catching cold ;
While you, my friend, whatever wind should
blow,
Might traverse England safely to and fro,
An honest man, close-buttoned to the chin,
Broadcloth without, and a warm heart within.

His relatives, who for the sake of the family name had clubbed together and settled an allowance on him, eyed him askance. He was tainted with madness, burdened by the expense of Sam Roberts and the outcast Dick Coleman, and harassed on account of this extravagance by the remonstrances of those who contributed his means of livelihood. While in this unhappy situation an anonymous letter (perhaps from

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Theodora) arrived, approving his conduct and bearing the assurance that if any contribution was withdrawn the deficiency would be made good. He resigned a Commissionership of Bankruptcy, and thereby reduced his already small income by some £60 per annum. He had given evidence of aptitude for nothing, except the facile writing of light verse. Failure seemed his assured portion. But for the moment he was happy; his spiritual burden had rolled away.

By way of amusement, the town possessed "a card assembly and a dance assembly, a horse-race and a club and a bowling-green." Presently he was on terms with the Unwins, "the most comfortable social folks you ever knew." The father, the Rev. Morley Unwin, the non-resident rector of Grimston, he likened to Parson Adams. Struck by the stranger's appearance, young Unwin had addressed him one morning after prayers, and thus one of the immortal friendships of literature was begun. Henceforth his lot was cast with the Evangelicals.

From the very commencement of the intimacy Cowper had felt attracted by Mrs. Unwin, prim enough Puritan, to judge from Harvey's engraving of her. He never saw her without feeling "the better for her company"; and when, dreading the loneliness of winter, he found that one of Unwin's pupils had left the house, he removed thither after a "tumult of anxious solicitude" and took up his abode with

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his new friends. He commenced his "Memoir"; spent his days in devotional exercises with the family; and such was the tenor of their lives that they acquired the name of Methodists among the less spiritually minded. To his cousin, Mrs. Cowper,¹ he thus described their manner of existence: "We breakfast commonly between eight and nine; till eleven we read either the Scripture or the sermons of some faithful preacher of these holy mysteries; at eleven we attend divine service, which is performed here twice every day; and from twelve to three we separate and amuse ourselves as we please. During the interval I either read in my own apartment or walk or ride or work in the garden. We seldom sit an hour after dinner, but, if the weather permits, adjourn to the garden, where, with Mrs. Unwin and her son, I have generally the pleasure of religious conversation till tea-time. If it rains or is too windy for walking, we either converse indoors or sing some hymns of Martin's collection, and by the help of Mrs. Unwin's harpsichord make up a tolerable concert, in which our hearts, I hope, are the most musical performers. After tea we sally forth to walk in good earnest. Mrs. Unwin is a good walker, and we have generally travelled about four miles before we see home again. At night we read and converse as before till supper, and commonly finish the evening either with hymns or with a sermon.

¹ Mrs. Cowper (Frauces Maria), wife of Colonel (late Major) Cowper, first cousin both to the poet and her husband.

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And last of all, the family are called to prayers. I need not tell you that such a life is consistent with the utmost cheerfulness ; accordingly we are all happy, and dwell together in unity as brethren. Mrs. Unwin has almost a maternal affection for me, and her son and I are brethren." ¹

Vague notions of taking Holy Orders passed through his head but were speedily abandoned. He turned his attention to gardening, and became a great florist and herb doctor. When certain inevitable Huntingdon gossip filtered through to his ears, young Unwin, returning from London, was requested to call at the Park, the residence of evangelical Mrs. Cowper, the Colonel's wife, with an introduction. Upon his return Cowper dispatched the following letter to his kinswoman : " My dear cousin, you sent my friend Unwin home to us charmed with your kind reception of him and with everything he saw at the Park. Shall I once more give you a peep into my vile and deceitful heart ? What motive do you think lay at the bottom of my conduct when I desired him to call upon you ? I did not suspect, at first, that pride and vain-glory had any share in it ; but quickly after I had recommended the visit to him I discovered in that fruitful soil the very root of the matter. You know that I am a stranger here ; all such are suspected characters unless they bring their credentials with them. To this moment, I believe, it is a matter of speculation in the place

¹ October 20, 1766

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whence I came and to whom I belong. Though my friend, you may suppose, before I was admitted an inmate here, was satisfied that I was not a mere vagabond, and has since that time received more convincing proofs of my *sponsibility*, yet I could not resist the opportunity of furnishing him with ocular demonstration of it by introducing him to one of my most splendid connexions; that when he hears me called *that fellow Cowper*, which has happened heretofore, he may be able, upon unquestionable evidence, to assert my gentlemanhood, and relieve me from the weight of that opprobrious appellation. Oh pride! pride! it deceives one with the subtlety of a serpent, and seems to walk erect, though it crawls upon this earth. How will it twist and twine itself about to get from under the Cross, which it is the glory of our Christian calling to be able to bear with patience and good will!" Poor lonely Cowper! A minor trouble this; yet you lay it seriously to heart!

On Sunday, July 2, 1767, as Unwin senior was riding to church at Graveley, he was thrown from his horse and sustained fracture of the skull. Death stalked rudely into the house, and by the following Thursday he had passed away. Once again Cowper must face the world, but on this occasion not alone. "I shall still, by God's leave, continue with Mrs. Unwin, whose behaviour to me has always been that of a mother to a son." To them in their sorrow came the ex-slaver John Newton, curate of

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Olney, "a little odd-looking man of the Methodistical order," who found them with plans unsettled. Their chief desire was for an evangelical minister to shepherd them in their need. A sentence in a letter from Newton led them to decide on Olney as their future home, and Orchard Side, close by the vicarage, was engaged. On December 9 they migrated to their new residence.

III

AT Orchard Side, whose prison-like appearance shocked William Unwin, Cowper wrote the "Moral Satires," "The Task," and "John Gilpin"; from its celebrated parlour he dated many of the most charming letters in the language; within its cracked, uncomely walls he knew misery and humiliation of soul, wading through waters of bitterness and treading the wine-press alone. Standing in the low quarter of the town, the situation of the house was far from agreeable. It was exposed to the harassments of the boys, who splashed the windows with mud; pierced by the wailing of infants, the squabbling of children, the scolding of women, the brawling of the lace-makers, the disgusting language of the men, the barking of dogs, and the multitudinous sounds and odours of the market-place. It was damp; the cellars in winter were filled with water; opportunity for exercise was limited. Yet, despite these unpleasant associa-

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tions, when the poet quitted the house for Weston, he wrote to Newton: "I could not help giving a last look to my old prison and its precincts; and, though I cannot easily account for it, having been miserable there so many years, felt something like a heart-ache when I took my last leave of a scene that certainly in itself had nothing to engage affection. But I recollected that I had once been happy there, and could not, without tears in my eyes, bid adieu to a place in which God had so often found me." ¹ Cowper, in his own eyes,

weorcum fâh
synnum âsâeled, sorgum gewaeled,
bitrum gebunden, bisgum bethrungen. . . .²

the singer of hope and trust, standing on the threshold of measureless despair; the poet who again "poured the stream of divine truth into the channels of our literature, after they had been shut against it for more than a hundred years," ³ in timid quest of sheltering haven, was, for the moment, content.

From this time forward John Newton played his part in the poet's life. Born on July 24, 1725, O. S.⁴ Newton had experienced in youth a series of almost incredible vicissitudes. His father, who was for many years shipmaster in the

¹ November 17, 1786.

With evil stained
In sin fast shackled, sorrow weighed
Bound with bitterness, with trouble compassed.

"Elene," ll. 1243-1245.

² Miller, "First Impressions of England."

⁴ V. Memoir.

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Mediterranean trade, took the lad aboard his vessel on his tenth birthday. Later, he was impressed aboard his Majesty's ship the *Harwich* and was promoted to the rank of midshipman. He deserted, was captured, flogged, and degraded. Obtaining his discharge off the African coast, he entered the service of a slave dealer of Sierra Leone; and despite the fact that he became the object of intense hate and cruelty on the part of his master's negro mistress, he yet found it possible to engage in mathematical studies. Presently, while on his way back to England, as he carelessly glanced through the pages of Stanhope's "Thomas-à-Kempis," the thought occurred, "What if these things should be true?" A violent tempest broke, he put prayer to the test; the storm abated, and soon land was sighted. Newton stepped ashore a converted man. Encouraged by Dr. Young, author of "Night Thoughts," to enter the ministry, he was after a time ordained by Dr. Green, Bishop of Lincoln.

Settled in Olney as curate, Newton was consumed with religious zeal. The vicar, Evangelical Moses Browne, with a taste for religious versifying, who "too much resembled Eli in his indulgence of his children," harassed by involved money affairs and the care of a numerous family, resided at Blackheath. Thus the curate was allowed perfect liberty to assault the strongholds of atheism and agnosticism after the manner he chose. His efforts to win souls were indefatigable. He preached in the surrounding district and invited his brethren

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to share in his work ; he held children's meetings and filled his modest church to overflowing. Gradually Cowper, from whom he was " seldom separate when at home," was dragged into the circle of his activities. These late lines, comfortably written in the snug parlour, describe the interior of many a miserable Olney cottage, as seen by the poet's charitable eyes during his visits with Newton :

Poor, yet industrious, modest, quiet, neat,
Such claim compassion in a night like this,
And have a friend in every feeling heart.
Warmed, while it lasts, by labour, all day long
They brave the season, and yet find at eve,
Ill clad and fed but sparely, time to cool.
The frugal housewife trembles when she lights
Her scanty stock of brushwood, blazing clear,
But dying soon, like all terrestrial joys.
The few small embers left she nurses well,
And while her infant race, with outspread hands,
And crowded knees, sit cowering o'er the sparks,
Retires, content to quake, so they be warmed.
The man feels least, as more inured than she
To winter, and the current in his veins
More briskly moved by his severer toil ;
Yet he too finds his own distress in theirs.
The taper soon extinguished, which I saw
Dangled along at the cold finger's end
Just when the day declined, and the brown loaf
Lodged on the shelf, half eaten without sauce
Of savoury cheese, or butter costlier still,
Sleep seems their only refuge : for, alas !
Where penury is felt the thought is chained,
And sweet colloquial pleasures are but few.

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With all this thrift they thrive not. All the care,
Ingenious parsimony takes, but just
Saves the small inventory, bed and stool,
Skillet and old carved chest, from public sale.
They live, and live without extorted alms
From grudging hands, but other boast have none
To soothe their honest pride, that scorns to beg ;
Nor comfort else, but in their mutual love.

Cowper attended Newton's meetings at the "Great House," a mansion belonging to Lord Dartmouth, patron of the Olney living, and was called upon to lead in prayer, an ordeal insupportable to his sensitive nature. These proceedings fell under the censure of Lady Hesketh. "Mr. Newton is an excellent man, I make no doubt, and a strong-minded man like himself might have been of great use, but to such a mind—such a tender mind—and to such a wounded yet lively imagination as our cousin's, I am persuaded that eternal praying and preaching were too much ; nor could it, I think, be otherwise." And ever since, it has been the habit to speak of Newton in a derogatory and unkindly strain. The discipline to which Cowper subjected himself was rigorous ; even with Lady Hesketh he ceased to correspond. But if Newton acquired complete ascendancy over Cowper's mind, he was, despite his reputation for preaching people mad, neither narrow nor tyrannical by nature ; neither morbid nor soured. He possessed a powerful force of will, great humour, and warm human sympathy. Cowper in the eyes of the world passed for a

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melancholy failure, a brooding idler, if not a simpleton, without money, prospects, or friends. Yet he was far from the weakly effeminate of popular conception. He could answer Newton with spirit, and he detested Canniford, the Weston curate, unreasoningly. He possessed dandified instincts, and when he had little over the dozen books of his own on his shelves, he could pay half a guinea for "a genteelish tooth-pick case" and twenty-five shillings for a stock-buckle that would "make a figure at Olney." That Newton is to be held responsible for Cowper's third derangement is absurd. Cowper went mad in the Middle Temple when he had health, money, interest, and lively and agreeable companionship. He went mad in the Inner Temple and attempted his life when nominated to the Clerkship of the Journals in the House of Lords. He went mad now, amid conditions which had once afforded him the highest pleasure and satisfaction. The death of his brother John, straitened circumstances, absence of intellectual intercourse, constant introspection, conduced to one inevitable issue. But for the moment the shadows were chased away through the congenial occupation of sacred composition.

During 1771-72, while Cowper was engaged along with Newton in the compilation of the Olney "Hymn Book," his mind alternated between hope and despair, assurance and uncertainty. He became engaged to Mrs. Unwin, but, convinced in a dream that sentence of damnation had been pronounced upon him and that God

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had withdrawn His presence, the obsession haunted his waking hours and became the central conviction of his life henceforth. The memory of his earlier disorder, described in these lines of terrible significance, revived :

Food I loathed, nor ever tasted
But by violence constrained,
Strength decay'd and body wasted
Spoke the terrors I sustained.

Bound and watch'd, lest life abhorring,
I should my own death procure,
For to me the Pit of Roaring
Seem'd more easy to endure.

Then, what soul-distressing noises
Seemed to reach me from below,
Visionary scenes and voices,
Flames of Hell and screams of woe !¹

On January 24, 1773, he plunged into a melancholy that made him almost an infant, and, taking refuge at the vicarage from the noise of the annual fair on April 12, he remained there for over a twelvemonth. All efforts at removal were fruitless. Recourse was had once again to Dr. Cotton, but the poet, racked with agony unspeakable, and convinced it was the will of God that he should, "after the example of Abraham, perform an expensive act of obedience and offer, not a son, but himself," attempted his life. Constant care was necessary. Mrs. Unwin removed to the vicarage,

¹ V. Wright, "Life of Cowper," p. 114.

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and the strain of watching was almost insupportable. The burden on Newton's household expenses was serious, but his care for the poor lunatic was unremitting, his devotion unfailing. When the clouds lifted and the weary, tortured soul emerged once again into tranquillity, he wrote these words: "Upon the whole, I have not been weary of my cross. Besides the submission I owe to the Lord, I think I can hardly do or suffer too much for such a friend, yet sometimes my heart has been impatient and rebellious." Never was portrait more maliciously drawn than that which represents Newton as the harsh, canting, tyrannical, bigoted ex-slaver in Orders, tormenting and goading to madness by his eternal round of prayer-meetings and psalm-singing, the delicate, will-less victim of his zeal.

The "Olney Hymns," published in 1779, numbered in all 348, of which Newton contributed the major portion. The object of their composition is explained in the preface as "a desire to promote the faith and comfort of sincere Christians, and secondly, to raise a monument to perpetuate the remembrance of an intimate friendship." In the beginning of the century, when Sternhold and Hopkins¹ were fallen to be the butt of the wits and the ridicule of the profane, complaints were frequent as to the melancholy conditions into which psalmody had sunk. The devout raised their voices in hymnic-

¹ Thomas Sternhold (d. 1549) and John Hopkins (d. 1570) versified the Psalms. Their version was exceedingly popular for three centuries."—V. "Cowper's Letters," ed. by Lucas and Milford, p. 540.

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doggerel, now sunk for the most part into merciful oblivion—until dissenting Isaac Watts, crying out as men have done in all ages against the decay of vital religion, and disgusted with the want of poetic refinement in the hymns in the Independent Chapel at Southampton, published in 1707 his "Hymns and Spiritual Songs." With the revival of religion, hymnology attained its highest expression. John Wesley published in 1780 his excellent "Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists"—a "body of experimental and practical religion," which influenced long after the voice of the preachers was stilled and but the memory of the names remained. These verses shadow forth the lurking terror presently to grip Cowper, to overwhelm him in chaos and night :

The billows swell, the winds are high,
Clouds overcast my wintry sky ;
Out of the depths to thee I call,—
My fears are great, my strength is small—

And again the despondent note is sounded in the beautiful lines entitled "Walking with God" :

Oh for a closer walk with God !
A calm and heavenly frame ;
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb !

Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord ?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and his word ?

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What peaceful hours I once enjoyed !
How sweet their memory still !
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill.

It is hardly necessary to quote more. This hymn, with "Hark, my soul ! it is the Lord," "Jesus ! where'er thy people meet," "Sometimes a light surprises," "God moves in a mysterious way," and many others, forms part of our common heritage. If the poetical merits of the "Olney Hymns" are small, these verses gave expression to the mute aspirations of a hundred thousand souls, and were welcomed gladly, while theological controversies expended themselves in harmless thunders.

Cowper was already in middle life when he began to collaborate with Newton ; and many sorrows had he overpast on his journey. After the third attack of his malady his reading had ceased. Hope had fled ; he walked as one on whom irrevocable sentence had been passed ; his intelligence was numbed, his faculties were paralysed. His early love poems lay behind him, the "Memoir," the Huntingdon letters, the "Lines on a Thunderstorm," his share in the "Olney Hymns" ; but there was little promise of more from his pen. *Die ultimo* 1774 he wrote these melancholy verses :

Heu ! quam remotus vescor omnibus
Quibus fruebar sub lare patrio
Quam nescius jucunda quondam
Arva, domum, socios, reliqui !

He occupied his attention with gardening, accepted a leveret from a neighbour, and, when

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it was known that he found pleasure in his new charge, he had presently as many offered him "as would have stocked a paddock." He retained three, and turned carpenter for their accommodation. Years later, when Hugh Miller visited the poet's house in Olney, and found the immortal parlour turned into an infant school, with two dozen chubby children poring over their tasks, he saw the small port-hole through which the hares came leaping to their carpet games.¹ Cowper immortalized his favourites in his graceful paper in the "Gentleman's Magazine," June 1784. He wrote to Hill with a view to taking in pupils,² but a month later, "If it were to rain pupils, perhaps I might catch a tub full; but till it does, the fruitlessness of my inquiries makes me think I must keep my Greek and Latin to myself."

Sir Thomas Hesketh died April 1778, and a small legacy fell to him; this eased his straitened circumstances somewhat. In June of the same year Thurlow had become Chancellor, and the poet wrote congratulatory lines, but refused to communicate with him lest his letter might be so construed, "Pray remember the poor." In January 1780, after a pastorate of almost sixteen years, Newton was presented to the living of St. Mary Woolnoth, in London, by Mr. Thornton, his friend and patron.

By the right thinking, Newton's labours were held in grateful remembrance; but his going was embittered by an unfortunate occurrence.

¹ "First Impressions of England."

² July 1776.

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Fire broke out in Olney, and many of the poor were rendered homeless. Newton exerted himself actively on behalf of the sufferers, and, acting solely in their interests, recommended that the November 5 illuminations should be discontinued, with all the attendant dangers. He preached against the custom in church, and anticipated that his request would meet with universal compliance. But when the day came, the people showed their determination to hold by their privileges. Never had Olney witnessed celebrations on such a lavish scale. A crowd of forty or fifty approached the vicarage and compelled Newton, to his bitter humiliation, to send them out money. His labours, he felt, had been in vain ; the ingratitude of those for whose sake he had spent himself to serve cut him to the quick. It is probable, as he informed his biographer (Mr. Cecil), he should " never have left the place while he lived had not such an incorrigible spirit prevailed in a parish he had long laboured to reform."

No one missed Newton more than Cowper, although the friendship was hardly so cordial as it had once been. But they had not passed out of each other's lives.

IV

NEWTON was succeeded in Olney by the curate of Weston. A less genial man than his predecessor, the Rev. Thomas Scott neither enjoyed similar intimacy with Cowper nor

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established ascendancy over him. But, by way of compensation, came Newton's friend, William Bull, an Independent minister of Newport Pagnell (*Carissime Taurorum*), "a man of letters and of genius, a master of fine imagination—or rather, not master of it," and a close friendship sprang up. The poet amused himself by drawing "mountains, valleys, woods and streams, and ducks and dabchicks"; attempted occasional verse, and was from time to time consulted by the cautious Olney folk on unimportant legal matters.

In 1780 a sensation was produced in the ranks of the theological party by the publication of Madan's "*Thelyphthora*," a plea for polygamy based on scriptural grounds. Cowper read the work, and declining at first to regard it seriously, forwarded an "impromptu" to Newton, who was amused by the epigram. The latter, however, presently viewing the business in a graver light, summoned his muscles "back to their pristine seriousness." On further reflection, Cowper was filled with indignation that such doctrines as were advocated in the "*Thelyphthora*" should be held by an Evangelical leader. He forgot that Madan had at one time shed a ray of comfort on his own darkness. Consumed with white heat, he wrote, and in 1781 published, his rejoinder through Johnson, a long poem entitled "*Anti-Thelyphthora*" in an anonymous quarto pamphlet. No one has ever ventured to praise this pasquinade, which, although it showed a certain metrical facility and satirical

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power, was unfortunately tainted by coarseness and vulgarity. Cowper, who later would fain have allowed the "Anti-Thelyphthora" to remain in obscurity, succeeded in being neither effective nor witty.¹ But he had at least fleshed his satiric blade.

The discovery once made that he could write thus facilely, he was unwilling to lay his pen aside. While Pitt reigned and Wilkes was being suspended from the House ; while Smollett was editing "The Briton" and Warren Hastings laying the foundations of the Indian Empire ; while England was losing the American Colonies and conquering Canada ; while Adam Smith was elaborating his system of economics and Hume and Robertson and Gibbon were the talk of literary circles ; while Burke and Sheridan were dazzling with their eloquence, Johnson writing his "Lives," Reynolds and Gainsborough painting their masterpieces, and the Whig wits collaborating in the "Rolliad"—Cowper was quietly penning his Letters and the "Moral Satires." On December 21, 1780, he wrote to Newton : "It will not be long, perhaps, before you will receive a poem called 'The Progress of Error.' That will be succeeded by another in due time, called 'Truth.'" In the following January "The Progress of Error" was dispatched to Newton and received the seal of his approval. To the two books already written he added "Table Talk," "Expostula-

¹ Some thirty years after Cowper's death, Southey discovered the authorship of the poem by accident. *V. Globe Cowper*, p. xlii.

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tion," "Hope," "Charity," "Conversation," and "Retirement," and the volume, which was published by Joseph Johnson¹ in February 1782, included his translations of Vincent Bourne. "Table Talk" was placed first, but the Preface written by Newton was, on account of its serious tone, withheld, at the publisher's suggestion, until the fifth edition. The theme was to be religion :

All other themes are sped,

Hackneyed and worn to the last flimsy thread—

and the poet, despite his assurances to the contrary, awaited his appearance in print with trepidation. He declared to Newton that "no censure of reviewers or other critical readers" would occasion him the smallest disturbance; but he dreaded the verdict of Dr. Johnson. "One of his pointed sarcasms," he wrote, "if he should happen to be displeased, would soon find its way into all companies and spoil the sale." But the Dictator, despite Judge Monboddo's declaration that he was "the most invidious and malignant man he had ever known, who praised neither author nor book that other people praised," read the volume and approved it.

With the exception of the "Critical Review"

¹ Cowper first came into touch with Johnson in 1781. In 1783 Johnson published "The Task." "The great author of the 'Rambler' has said, 'That a bookseller is the only Mécenas of the modern world.' Without assenting to all the eulogy and all the satire implied in this remarkable sentiment, we may take a pleasure in observing that in the class of men so magnificently and sportively commended there are several individuals, each of whom a writer of the most delicate manners and exalted mind may justly esteem as a pleasing associate, and as a liberal friend. In this light Cowper regarded his bookseller, Mr. Johnson." "The Life of Cowper," by William Hayley, vol. iii., p. 310.

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the notices of the new volume were favourable. "These poems," the latter declared, "are written, as we learn from the title-page, by Mr. Cowper of the Inner Temple, who seems to be a man of a sober and religious turn of mind, with a benevolent heart, and a serious wish to inculcate the precepts of morality ; he is not, however, possessed of any superior abilities or the power of genius requisite for so arduous an undertaking. . . . If this author had followed the advice given by Caraccioli, and which he has chosen for one of the mottoes prefixed to these poems, he would have clothed his indisputable truths in some more becoming disguise, and rendered his work much more agreeable. In its present shape we cannot compliment him on its beauty ; for, as this bard himself sweetly sings :

The clear harangue, and cold as it is clear,
Falls soporific on the listening ear."

The poetical world into which Cowper made his unobtrusive entry was arid and bare enough. The fields for the moment lay fallow, awaiting fresh tillage. "Epitaph" Hayley, whose "Ballads founded on Anecdotes of Animals" Blake illustrated, "ambled over the course without a competitor." From poetry lyrical inspiration had fled ; verse had become formal, correct, artificial, improved beyond measure. "To Dryden," Johnson decreed, "we owe the improvement, perhaps the completion of our metre, the refinement of our language, and

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much of the correctness of our sentiments. . . . What was said of Rome adorned by Augustus may be applied by an easy metaphor to English poetry embellished by Dryden, 'lateritiam invenit, marmoream reliquit.' He found it brick and left it marble." Unanswerable the question despite Thomas Warton, "If Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found?" When Cowper wrote "The Task" the influence of Pope was almost expended. But he had dowered English poetry with a literature of new phrases; he had established a standard of correctness and advanced the couplet to such perfection that less skilful versifiers could neither hope to improve it nor avoid incurring the suspicion of direct imitation. Addison might commend the old ballad of "Chevy Chase," Thomson renounce the couplet vogue, Gray (whom Johnson called a mechanical poet to Boswell) indulge in novel lyric measures, Collins exercise his skill in new harmonies, mastery of the couplet remained the distinctive mark of poetic craft. During the thirty years previous to the penning of Johnson's lines, poetasters strove to retain the skill of their master, but, lacking his genius, they lowered his standard, and gradually the couplet system, toppling already in his lifetime, crumbled and broke. Chatterton cast back to mediævalism; the "Reliques" revived the ballad, never dead; Thomas Warton laboriously traced the obscure stream of our older verse; Joseph, discussing the beauties of the "Seasons," manfully attacked the Pope

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fetish. The spirit of poetry refused to be further trammelled by the restraints of the couplet. The truth of Cowper's complaint was recognized, that

Manner is all in all, whate'er is writ,
The substitute for genius, sense, and wit.

The poetic diction, against which Wordsworth girds, had taught a false method of singing and rendered song unnatural. "The business of a poet," said Imlac, "is to examine not the individual, but the species ; to remark general properties and large appearances. He does not number the streaks of the tulip or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest ; he is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind, and must neglect the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked and another have neglected, for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and to carelessness." But the age had premonitions of coming change. Thomson handed down, in the legacy of the "Seasons," his nature love ; the poetry of Gray—who had no dealings with the "great bear" or the literary men who acknowledged his dictatorship—sounded a pleasant note in the arid atmosphere ; vague aspirations towards nature-study moved in men's souls. If for the moment a fashion of decadent satire set in, a passing classic mode, feebly held to by a fry of poetasters ; if again the mists gathered, and threatened to settle

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darkly—it was impossible to do more than momentarily hinder the Romantic growth. To eradicate it was impossible. But when the “Lives” were completed in 1781, the fiat went forth, and it seemed as if the threatening murmur of rebellion was stilled. In the following year Cowper published “Table Talk,” and Johnson was pleased to speak in favourable terms of the volume. But he failed to observe its salient innovations; he failed to remark the absence of the Popeian inversions in the seemingly orthodox verse, and the utter neglect of the conventionalizing and generalizing principles enunciated in “Rasselas.”

It was undeniable that the volume contained great faults. Cowper was little qualified for the office of satirist of his age. He had neither the acuteness of Dryden nor the vitriolic fierceness of Churchill; he neither possessed marked originality nor commanded a wide intellectual range; he was censorious and partial. The sale of the volume was slow. Readers of poetry, finding nothing different in manner or in matter from the currency of the century, hesitated to purchase. But, if he was neither inspired with the divine ardour nor consumed by the poetic zeal of his successors, his teaching obtained in a hundred exclusive circles which had never read one line of Romaine, nor heard one syllable from the lips of John Wesley, and who regarded Whitefield with pious horror or undisguised contempt. These lines embody his attitude :

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Pity Religion has so seldom found
A skilful guide into poetic ground !
The flowers would spring where'er she deigned to
 stray,
And every muse attend her in her way.
Virtue indeed meets many a rhyming friend,
And many a compliment politely penned,
But unattired in that becoming vest
Religion weaves for her, and half undressed,
Stands in the desert shivering and forlorn,
A wintry figure, like a withered thorn.

He was sincere and simple in his expression ; the commonplace verse he brightened with gleams of humour and shrewd observation. He was a professing Christian, and in an age which boasted neither a Gray nor a Chatterton the experimentalist, austere and dull though he might be, with a definite motive for writing, was welcomed by the Moralists. And as he wrote, he was all the time the victim of crushing, hopeless despair. He was proof against argument, regarding his fate with fixed hopelessness : " reasoning might say one thing but fact said another." Newton cited the case of Simon Browne, who, convinced " he had fallen under the sensible displeasure of God, who had caused his rational soul gradually to perish," resigned his pastoral charge, developed suicidal tendencies and continued in his delusion until his death. Cowper found his own case was " by far the most deplorable of the two." Under these conditions was the first volume written.

When Johnson was persuaded by Newton to

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undertake the publication of the "Moral Satires" he exposed himself to considerable financial risk. The theme was unpromising, the author unknown. Had Newton's "Preface" been inserted, the fate of the volume would have been sealed. As it was, the poet, depressed by the apathy of the reading public, wrote to Unwin,¹ in reply to a query as to whether he was intent on another volume, that, if he might account himself happy in having pleased the few, he was not rich enough to despise the many. He added that the lack of encouragement he had received precluded all immediate idea of any further publication. The public had neither the desire nor the necessity to imbibe somewhat repellent evangelical doctrines through the medium of inferior verse. The approval of Benjamin Franklin was, in some measure, compensation for the mortification caused by the unfavourable verdict of the "Critical Review"; but Cowper had little reason to expect to be borne immediately on the crest of the popular wave. Had he continued in sulky silence for the remainder of his days, his volume would have been quietly buried in some obscure corner, and the spot have remained unmarked, even by the literary archæologist.

Cowper spared himself no pains in his work. "To touch and re-touch," he wrote, "is, though some writers boast of negligence and others would be ashamed to show their foul copies, the secret of almost all good writing,

¹ Letter undated.

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especially in verse. I am never weary of it myself." ¹ But his own verses too frequently stagger and hobble. These lines from the "Progress of Error," written in harsh mood, illustrate his failing :

Occiduous is a pastor of renown ;
When he has prayed and preached the Sabbath down,
With wire and catgut he concludes the day,
Quavering and semi-quavering care away. . . .
Oh fie ! 'Tis evangelical and pure :
Observe each face, how sober and demure !
Ecstasy sets her stamp on every mien
Chins fallen, and not an eyeball to be seen.

Cowper lashing the world is one thing ; Cowper administering correction to a delinquent trussed and bound, is a wholly different spectacle. In the eyes of the quiet Olney household the incarnation of all that was godless and worldly was the Earl of Chesterfield, on whose satiric portraiture the poet employed unsparing pencil :

Petronius ! all the Muses weep for thee,
But every tear shall scald thy memory.
The Graces too, while Virtue at their shrine
Lay bleeding under that soft hand of thine,
Felt each a mortal stab in her own breast,
Abhorred the sacrifice, and cursed the priest :
Thou polished and high-finished foe to truth,
Grey-beard corrupter of our listening youth,
To purge and skim away the filth of vice,
That so refined it might the more entice,
Then pour it on the morals of thy son
To taint *his* heart, was worthy of *thine* own.

¹ To the Rev. William Unwin, July 2, 1780.

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Cowper's ignorance of the world and his lack of reasoned conviction was an indictment against his work. He was inconsistent in his attitude, and liable to be constantly influenced by the personal factor. A passage in "Expostulation," objectionable to Papists, was with Newton's approval excised, when he had made the acquaintance of the Catholic Throckmortons; but, despite his evangelical fervour, he later became the inseparable companion of Padre Gregson, their chaplain, who transcribed Homer for him. The cancelled passage runs as follows :

Hast thou admitted with a blind, fond trust,
The lie that burn'd thy fathers' bones to dust,
That first adjudged them heretics, then sent
Their souls to heav'n, and cursed them as they
went ?

The lie that Scripture strips of its disguise,
And execrates above all other lies,
The lie that claps a lock on mercy's plan,
And gives the key to yon infirm old man,
Who once insconced in apostolic chair
Is deified and sits omniscient there ;
The lie that knows no kindred, owns no friend
But him that makes its progress his chief end,
That having spilt much blood, makes that a boast,
And canonizes him that sheds the most ?
Away with charity that soothes a lie,
And thrusts the truth with scorn and anger by ;
Shame on the candour and the gracious smile
Bestow'd on them that light the martyr's pile,
While insolent disdain in frowns express'd
Attends the tenets that endured that test :

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Grant them the rights of men, and while they cease
To vex the peace of others, grant them peace ;
But trusting bigots whose false zeal has made
Treach'ry their duty, thou art self-betray'd.

He censured the practice of smoking in
"Conversation" ; but there was infinite excuse
for his friend Bull.

Forgive the bard, if bard he be,
Who once too wantonly made free,
To touch with a satiric wipe,
That symbol of thy power, the pipe ; . . .
And so may smoke-inhaling Bull
Be always filling, never full.¹

He condemned the "slumbering oscitancy" of
colleges, but had no word of reproach for Benet
College :

In which order yet
Was sacred.

He was probably unaware, when he vindicated
the memory of Whitefield (Leuconomus) in
"Hope," that his hero was an advocate of
slavery. The city he remembered merely as the
Babel from which he had made his escape :

humming with a restless crowd
Sordid as active, ignorant as loud
Whose highest praise is that they live in vain,
The dupes of pleasure or the slaves of gain !
Where works of man are clustered close around
And works of God are hardly to be found.

But there was abundant evidence of higher

¹ Epistle to the Rev. William Bull, June 22, 1782.

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capacity in the Satires. "Retirement," freed from the harsh versification of the earlier work, and with the inexactitude of the rhymes improved beyond measure, is distinguished by high descriptive faculty and genuine poetic feeling. Cowper was wholly destitute of constructive power; he was unable to develop continuously a single idea, incapable of winding into the heart of his subject or of elaborating a consistent philosophy. The distractions of his retirement rendered impossible continuous concentration. Earlier the Elizabethan pamphleteers had denounced poetry, levelled venomous and uncritical attacks against the art and function of the poet. With Sidney—who still and utterly denied that there was sprung out of earth a more fruitful knowledge—as with Cowper, the end of poetry was to teach and delight. Wilson argued on behalf of the moral value of poetry, "for undoubtedly there is no one tale among all the Poets, but under the same is comprehended something that pertaineth either to the amendment of manners, to the knowledge of truth, to the setting forth of Nature's work. . . . The Poets were wise men and wished in heart the redress of things." In similar fashion Cowper might have reasoned. Judged by Webbe's standard his poetry would satisfy all the necessary requirements: "The perfect perfection of poetry is this, to mingle delight with profit in such wise that a reader might by his reading be partaker of both." The Elizabethan defence argued that poetry

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was the sugar-coating of the pill, the candy with the dose of rhubarb ; the kernel the *moralitas*, the poet the right popular philosopher. Cowper sought to instruct his age, to strip and whip abuse entertainingly. Unconcerned with æsthetic theories of his art, he wrote : " My sole drift is to be useful : a point at which, however, I know I should in vain aim, unless I could be likewise entertaining. I have therefore fixed these two strings to my bow ; and by the help of both have done my best to send my arrow to the mark. My readers will hardly have begun to laugh before they will be called upon to correct that levity and peruse me with a more serious air. I cast a sidelong glance at the good liking of the world at large, more for the sake of the advantage and instruction than their praise. They are children : if we give them physic we must sweeten the rim of the cup with honey." Cowper sought to teach and delight, caring neither to teach without delighting nor to delight without teaching, and disseminated in this manner the teaching of the Evangelical school. " Charity " espoused the cause of the slave ; " Expostulation," which the poet declared that he wrote with tolerable ease to himself, held up the fate of the Jewish race before the eyes of England. The theme of " Truth," second in order of composition, is man's universal need of salvation. " The Progress of Error," the first written of the series, is the general assertion that the fashionable vices of the day account

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for the degeneracy of humanity. Of "Table Talk," which he placed first in the volume, reminiscent of the Drydenian manner, he wrote:¹ "I send you 'Table Talk.' It is a medley of many things, some that may be useful and some that, for aught I know, may be very diverting. I am merry that I may decoy people into my company, and grave that they may be the better for it. Now and then I put on the garb of a philosopher, and take the opportunity that disguise procures me to drop a word in favour of religion. . . . A poet in my circumstances has a difficult part to act : one minute obliged to bridle his humour, if he has any ; and the next, to clap a spur to the sides of it : now ready to weep from a sense of the importance of his subject, and on a sudden constrained to laugh, lest his gravity should be mistaken for dullness."

Embedded in the dull framework of moralizing are found such excellent vignettes as those of the ancient Prude in "Truth," taken from Hogarth's "Morning," and Sir Smug in "Hope" :

Yon ancient prude, whose withered features show
She might be young some forty years ago,
Her elbows pinioned close upon her hips,
Her head erect, her fan upon her lips,
Her eyebrows arched, her eyes both gone astray.
To watch yon amorous couple in their play,
With bony and unkerchiefed neck defies
The rude inclemency of wintry skies,
And sails with lappet-head and mincing airs
Duly at clink of bell, to morning prayers.

¹ To the Rev. John Newton, February 18, 1781.

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To thrift and parsimony much inclined,
She yet allows herself that boy behind ;
The shivering urchin, bending as he goes,
With slipshod heels, and dew-drop at his nose,
His predecessors' coat advanced to wear,
Which future pages are yet doomed to share ;
Carries her Bible tucked beneath his arm,
And hides his hands to keep his fingers warm.

She, half an angel in her own account,
Doubts not hereafter with the saints to mount,
Though not a grace appears on strictest search,
But that she fasts, and, *item*, goes to church.
Conscious of age, she recollects her youth,
And tells, not always with an eye to truth,
Who spanned her waist, and who, where'er he
came,

Scrawled upon glass Miss Bridget's lovely name,
Who stole her slipper, filled it with Tokay,
And drank the little bumper every day.
Of temper as envenomed as an
Censorious, and her every word a wasp ;
In faithful memory she records the crimes
Or real or fictitious, of the times ;
Laughs at the reputations she has torn,
And holds them dangling at arm's length in scorn.

Sighing and smiling as he takes his glass,
Which they that woo preferment rarely pass,
" Fallible man," the church-bred youth replies,
" Is still found fallible, however wise ;
And differing judgments serve but to declare,
That truth lies somewhere, if we knew but where.
Of all it ever was my lot to read,
Of critics now alive, or long since dead,
The book of all the world that charmed me most
Was—well-a-day, the title page was lost ;

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The writer well remarks, a heart that knows
To take with gratitude what Heaven bestows,
With prudence always ready at our call,
To guide our use of it, is all in all.
Doubtless it is. To which, of my own store,
I superadd a few essentials more ;
But these, excuse the liberty I take,
I waive just now, for conversation sake."—
"Spoke like an oracle ! " they all exclaim,
And add Right Reverend to Smug's honoured
name.

The spirit of " Conversation," which reminds
of the letters, is light and kindly ; the versifi-
cation is natural and spontaneous. One passage,
although it may rank low as poetry, stamped
with a quiet homely beauty, breathes the very
essence of the Christian spirit in lines of quiet
dignity :

It happened on a solemn eventide,
Soon after He that was our surety died,
Two bosom friends, each pensively inclined,
The scene of all those sorrows left behind,
Sought their own village, busied as they went
In musings worthy of the great event :
They spake of him they loved, of him whose life,
Though blameless, had incurred perpetual strife,
Whose deeds had left, in spite of hostile arts,
A deep memorial graven on their hearts.
The recollection, like a vein of ore,
The farther traced, enriched them still the more ;
They thought him, and they justly thought him, one
Sent to do more than he appeared to have done,
To exalt a people, and to place them high
Above all else, and wondered he should die.

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Ere yet they brought their journey to an end,
A stranger joined them, courteous as a friend,
And asked them with a kind engaging air
What their affliction was, and begged a share.
Informed, he gathered up the broken thread,
And, truth and wisdom gracing all he said,
Explained, illustrated, and searched so well
The tender theme, on which they chose to dwell,
That reaching home, "The night," they said, "is
near,

We must not now be parted, sojourn here."
The new acquaintance soon became a guest,
And, made so welcome to their simple feast,
He blessed the bread, but vanished at the word,
And left them both exclaiming, "'Twas the Lord !
Did not our hearts feel all he deigned to say,
Did they not burn within us by the way ? "

The humour of the "Satires" is peculiarly
Cowper's own. The "bowing, smirking, smart
Abbé" in the "Progress of Error," who
encounters the two English travellers,

Points to inscriptions wheresoe'er they tread,
Such as when legible were never read, . . .
Exhibits elevations, drawings, plans,
Models of Herculean pots and pans,
And sells them medals, which, if neither rare
Nor ancient, will be so, preserved with care.

There are clever individual lines and couplets
which fix themselves naturally in the memory.
Thus :

Absence of occupation is not rest
A mind quite vacant is a mind distressed.

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A noisy man is always in the right.

Men deal with life, as children with their play,
Who first misuse, then cast their toys away ;
Live to no sober purpose, and contend
That their Creator had no serious end.

Such, the "teapot pieties" of Cowper !

The publication of his volume exposed Cowper not only to the onslaught of the critics, but to an additional mortification for which he himself was responsible. He forwarded a copy of his work to Thurlow, accompanied by the following letter :

"Olney, Bucks,
Feb. 25, 1782.

"My Lord,—I make no apology for what I account a duty ; I should offend against the cordiality of our former friendship should I send a volume into the world, and forget how much I am bound to pay my particular respects to your Lordship upon that occasion. When we parted you little thought of hearing from me again ; and I as little that I should live to write to you, still less that I should wait on you in the capacity of an author.

"Among the pieces I have the honour to send, there is one for which I must entreat your pardon. I mean that of which your Lordship is the subject. The best excuse I can make is, that it flowed almost spontaneously from the affectionate remembrance of a connexion that did me so much honour.

"As to the rest, their merits, if they have

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any, and their defects, which are probably more than I am aware of, will neither of them escape your notice. But where there is much discernment, there is generally much candour; and I commit myself into your Lordship's hands, with the less anxiety, being well acquainted with yours.

"If n first visit after so long an interval should prove neither a troublesome nor a dull one, but especially if not altogether an unprofitable one, *omne tui punctum*.

"I have the honour to be, though with very different impressions of some subjects, yet with the same sentiments of affection and esteem as ever, your Lordship's faithful and most obedient, humble servant,

"W. C."

He awaited acknowledgment of his gift in vain. He informed Unwin that when Hill had mentioned the approaching publication of the volume, the Chancellor returned no answer, and that later his "poor authorship was not so much as mentioned." Colman, who had produced the "Jealous Wife" in 1761, and from whom, on account of the early Temple intimacy, the poet expected at least acknowledgment, ignored his gift likewise. Both turned a deaf ear to the voice of one whom they regarded as belonging to the melancholy army of life's failures. Cowper, deeply wounded, penned his "Valediction," which he forwarded to Unwin. This poem, which remained unpublished until

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after the death of Colman and Thurlow,
began :

Farewell, false hearts ! whose best affections fail,
Like shallow brooks which summer suns exhale !
Forgetful of the man whom once ye chose,
Cold in his cause, and careless of his woes,
I bid you both a long and last adieu,
Cold in my turn, and unconcerned like you.

The " Monthly Review " had termed Cowper a poet " sui generis " and accorded him high praise. But neither the trite moral maxims of the " Progress of Error " nor the Evangelicism of " Truth " could assure of literary salvation. It lay with him still to justify the reviewer's verdict.

" Tirocinium " is a moral satire of somewhat later date.¹ Cowper had already passed middle life when he attacked the public school system of his day. His object was " to censure the want of discipline and the scandalous inattention to morals that obtain in them, especially in the largest, and to recommend private tuition as a mode of education preferable on all accounts." Elsewhere he wrote : " I do not know that schools in the gross, and especially public schools, have ever been so pointedly condemned before. But they are become a nuisance, a pest, an abomination ; and it is fit that the eyes and noses of mankind should, if possible, be opened to perceive it." Here the theologian speaks and the recluse ; the man of culture

¹ Two hundred lines of the poem were written in 1782 and it was resumed in 1784.

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never sought to deny the intellectual advantage of a Westminster education. It was the recollection of the many "acts of barbarism" endured at Market Street that inspired his lines. He had, in an earlier paper "On Secrets," contributed to the "Connoisseur"¹ his opinion on school education: "The management of young gentlemen is equally absurd. In most of our schools, if the lad is discovered in a scrape, the impeachment of an accomplice, as at the Old Bailey, is made the condition of a pardon."

In "Tirocinium" Cowper protested against the inevitable weakening of the ties between parent and child under the public school system, and condemned its cherished spirit of emulation as productive of little but evil.

Our public hives of puerile resort
That are of chief and most approved report,
To such base hopes, in many a sordid soul
Owe their repute in part, but not the whole.
A principle whose proud pretensions pass
Unquestioned, though the jewel be but glass,
That with a world not often over-nice
Ranks as a virtue, and is yet a vice ;
Or rather a gross compound, justly tried,
Of envy, hatred, jealousy, and pride—
Contributes most perhaps to enhance their fame,
And emulation is its specious name.
Boys, once on fire with that contentious zeal,
Feel all the rage that female rivals feel :
The prize of beauty in a woman's eyes
Not brighter than in theirs the scholar's prize.

¹ No. 119.

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The spirit of that competition burns
With all varieties of ills by turns ;
Each vainly magnifies his own success,
Resents his fellow's, wishes it were less,
Exults in his miscarriage if he fail,
Deems his reward too great if he prevail,
And labours to surpass him day and night,
Less for improvement than to tickle spite.
The spur is powerful, and I grant its force ;
It pricks the genius forward in its course,
Allows short time for play, and none for sloth :
And, felt alike by each, advances both :
But judge, where so much evil intervenes,
The end, though plausible, not worth the means.
Weigh, for a moment, classical desert
Against a heart depraved and temper hurt ;
Hurt too perhaps for life, for early wrong,
Done to the nobler part, affects it long ;
And you are staunch indeed in learning's cause
If you can crown a discipline, that draws
Such mischiefs after it, with much applause.

The dullness, the halting nature of much of the verse of the " Satires " arose from the fact that the poet, marching blindly forward, was too frequently uncertain of his objective and unfamiliar with his ground. But here he advances, nothing doubting. If for a moment memory rises gently ; if a wave of tender recollection softens his mood of bitterness and he can declare feelingly :

We love the play-place of our early days.
The scene is touching, and the heart is stone
That feels not at that sight, and feels at none,

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the irresistible logic of facts speedily crushes these sentiments, and he harshly demands :

Then why resign into a stranger's hand
A task as much within your own command,
That God and Nature, and your interest too,
Seem with one voice to delegate to you ?
Why hire a lodging in a house unknown
For one whose tenderest thoughts all hover round
your own ?

This second weaning, needless as it is,
How does it lacerate both your heart and his !
The indented stick, that loses day by day
Notch after notch, till all are smoothed away,
Bears witness, long ere his dismissal come,
With what intense desire he wants his home.
But though the joys he hopes beneath your roof
Bid fair enough to answer in the proof,
Harmless and safe, and natural, as they are,
A disappointment waits him even there :
Arrived, he feels an unexpected change,
He blushes, hangs his head, is shy and strange ;
No longer takes, as once with fearless ease,
His favourite stand between his father's knees,
But seeks the corner of some distant seat,
And eyes the door, and watches a retreat ;
And least familiar where he should be most,
Feels all his happiest privileges lost.
Alas, poor boy !—the natural effect
Of love by absence chilled into respect.

While the poet was realizing that the "Satires" had not brought him fame, he received from William Bull three volumes of poetry, composed by Madame Guyon. He translated several of the poems with his cordial encouragement—verses

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bearing on such themes as divine love, gratitude to God, and self-surrender, which were posthumously published ; and for the moment there was little danger of a return of his malady. He was busy ; he had the company of Lady Austen ; his letters dating from this period are filled with humour and playfulness ; despair, it almost seemed, had fled. Presently we find him occupied with "The Task."

V

IT was during the time that Cowper was still busy over "Charity," while the dark clouds came and went and the first new old notes of revolt rose quaveringly, that a new personality entered his life : "a lively, agreeable woman, who had seen much of the world, and accounted it a great simpleton, as it is—one who laughed and made laugh, and could keep up a conversation without seeming to labour at it." Gazing one day idly from his window, he saw two ladies enter the draper's shop across the street ; one was Mrs. Jones of Clifton, the other Lady Austen, her sister, a widow. Mrs. Unwin invited them to tea, but the poet's bashfulness leaping on him, forbade him to enter the company. Mastering himself at last, however, he stole shyly into the room, talked gaily, convoyed the guests home, and afterward returned the visit with his companion.¹

¹ Cowper made Lady Austen's acquaintance July 1781. The "Moral Satires" were published February 1782.

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Toward the close of the year he wrote to her ladyship :

But who can tell how vast the plan,
Which this day's incident began ?

Had he not mastered his diffidence and forced himself into the company, it is improbable he would ever have discovered the full measure of his genius or that we should have had the true revelation of himself ; it is unlikely he would have left his generous legacy to prosperity.

Lady Austen was before long " Sister Anne " ; the poet " Brother William." As the weather held good, there was a pleasant little luncheon-party in the Spinney, to which sat down Cowper and Mrs. Unwin, Lady Austen, and Mr. and Mrs. Jones. Her Ladyship's lackey and a lad that waited on the poet in the garden, drove a wheelbarrow full of eatables and drinkables to the scene of the *fête champêtre*. Thither too went Hannah Willson, with her head as yet unfilled with her romantic nonsense, which brought little comfort to the sad Weston household in later days. When her ladyship returned to London with the idea of settling in Olney, she proposed a correspondence. Cowper gladly accepted the idea and penned his letters gaily until, some absurd romantic notion entering her ladyship's foolish head, we learn that the friendship that promised so fair is at an end. The poet had written something that gave offence, and stood on his dignity. An apology healed the breach for the moment ; " but at

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length," he writes to Unwin,¹ "having had repeated occasion to observe that she expressed a sort of romantic idea of our merits, and built such expectations of felicity upon our friendship as we were sure that nothing human could possibly answer, I wrote to remind her that we were mortal, to recommend it to her not to think more highly of us than the subject would warrant, and intimated that when we embellish a creature with colours taken from our own fancy, and so adorned, admire and praise it beyond its real merits, we make it an idol, and have nothing to expect in the end but that it will deceive our hopes, and that we shall derive nothing from it but a painful conviction of our error. . . ." The letter "gave mortal offence : it received indeed an answer, but such an one as I could by no means reply to ; and there ended (for it was impossible it should ever be renewed) a friendship that bid fair to be lasting."

By the following June, however, the poet, gratified with the present of three pairs of ruffles, had made his peace, and Lady Austen had returned to the Olney neighbourhood. She took apartments in the vicarage, and the private gate in the wall, closed since Newton's departure, was reopened for her convenience. She had a constant flow of lively conversation and was a skilled performer on the harpsichord ; Mrs. Unwin was tranquil and contented ; the poet cheerful and busied with his correspondence.

February 9, 1782.

COWPER & HIS POETRY

He danced attendance on the ladies in the morning and in the evening wound thread. He had his books forwarded from his London library, from Bull and Unwin, and fell into the habit of reading aloud. In this fashion life glided past, and for the moment there was no cloud on the horizon. But presently he fell silent, and neither her ladyship's gaiety nor the tranquillity of Mrs. Unwin could dispel his black cloud of melancholy. Not until Lady Austen told him the story of Gilpin did the gloom disperse. Its drollery made an irresistible appeal to his sense of humour ; he retired, and by the following morning the rough draft of the immortal ballad was composed. He secluded himself for several days in his greenhouse, expanding and polishing it ; and dispatched the finished sheets to Barber Wilson across the street. When completed to his satisfaction, he forwarded it to the "Public Advertiser," where it appeared anonymously, November 1782. It was not long before every one was acquainted with it ; it was hackneyed in every magazine and newspaper, it was recited by Henderson in the Freemasons' Hall before Mrs. Siddons ; and the author was induced to attempt an unsuccessful sequel. Poor tortured soul writing these verses which Hazlitt and a hundred others have so ungrudgingly praised ; " the grinners at ' John Gilpin ' little think what its writer sometimes suffered ! "

Cowper had little inventive genius. It was Mrs. Unwin who suggested the " Progress of

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Error," and Lady Austen who inspired "John Gilpin," "The Task," and the lines on the "Loss of the 'Royal George.'" Cowper, left to himself, translated the "Iliad." Urged now by Lady Austen to write something in blank verse, he complained of inability to find a suitable theme. "You can never be in want of a subject," her impatient ladyship replied, "you can write upon anything—write upon this sofa." The hint was taken, and the work commenced which was to establish beyond all question his pre-eminence among his contemporaries. "The Sofa," begun in mock-heroic strain, developed into "The Task"; which labour led to consequences wholly unexpected. Cowper wrote busily—*nulla dies sine linea*, as Tully had laid down—and could barely spare the time for paying his devoirs to her exacting ladyship every morning at eleven. He grew restive, but politeness constrained; his attentions were unrelaxed, until a new factor complicated the situation. Gradually a light broke and suspicion became certainty—Lady Austen was in love with him! He thought the situation over, taking no blame to himself, sat down at his desk and penned "a very tender yet resolute letter," wherein he explained and lamented the circumstances that forced him to renounce her society. Her ladyship received the missive, read it, crimsoned, committed it to the flames; this time no more presents of ruffles. Poor gentle, chastened poet—charming companion whom Lamb and Coleridge loved,

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sad broken spirit with maces not far away
and melancholy sitting at the board, how
pleasant must have been that fleeting friend-
ship! A thousand pities that the worldly little
lady who drove dull care away and brought
gentle laughter to those lips should have been
injudicious enough to fall in love with our poet,
too! Very beautiful is the tribute to Mrs. Unwin
which he later inserted in "The Task," when the
breach with Lady Austen still freshly rankled:

And witness, dear companion of my walks,
Whose arm this twentieth winter I perceive
Fast locked in mine, with pleasure such as love,
Confirmed by long experience of thy worth
And well-tryed virtues, could alone inspire,
Witness a joy that thou hast doubled long.
Thou knowest my praise of nature most sincere,
And that my raptures are not conjured up
To serve occasions of poetic pomp,
But genuine, and art partner of them all.

It was well for your ladyship that your poet
wrote that letter—well that his heart was
honourably in Mrs. Unwin's keeping. Had your
sprightly personality been linked to his, listening
continually "to the language of a heart hopeless
and deserted," you, who saw but the fleeting
shadows on the surface of that unplumbed lake,
had known misery and despair as your lasting
portion.¹

¹ Lady Austen married M. de Tardiff. She died in 1802.
"As appears from the ledger of Mr. Grindon, Lady Austen was
staying with her sister at Clifton again in August 1786, and also in
March 1787. But Cowper and she were now strangers to each other.
Although only two miles separated them, there was no communica-
tion between her and the poet."—T. Wright, "Life of Cowper," p. 351.

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Writing on July 12, 1784, to Unwin, Cowper had a certain diffidence in approaching the subject of the disagreement. But finally : " You are going to Bristol. A lady, not long since our near neighbour, is probably there ; she *was* there very lately. If you should chance to fall into her company, remember, if you please, that we found the connexion on some accounts an inconvenient one ; that we do not wish to renew it ; and conduct yourself accordingly." The poet has definitely made up his mind in the matter, but beyond the bare facts of the case Unwin learns little from this letter. Eighteen months later Cowper wrote to Lady Hesketh : " There came a lady into this country, by name and title Lady Austen, the widow of the late Sir Robert Austen. At first she lived with her sister, about a mile from Olney ; but in a few weeks took lodgings at the vicarage here. Between the vicarage and the back of our house are interposed our garden, an orchard, and the garden belonging to the vicarage. She had lived much in France, was very sensible, and had infinite vivacity. She took a great liking to us, and we to her. She had been used to a great deal of company, and we, fearing that she would find such a transition into silent retirement irksome, contrived to give her our agreeable company often. Becoming continually more and more intimate, a practice obtained at length of our dining with each other alternately every day, Sundays excepted. In order to facilitate our communication, we made

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doors in the two garden-walls abovesaid, by which means we considerably shortened the way from one house to the other, and could meet when we pleased without entering the town at all—a measure the rather expedient, because the town is abominably dirty and she kept no carriage. On her first settlement in our neighbourhood, I made it my own particular business (for at that time I was not employed in writing, having published my first volume and not begun my second) to pay my devoirs to her ladyship every morning at eleven. Customs very soon became laws. I began 'The Task'; for she was the lady who gave me the Sofa for a subject. Being once engaged in the work, I began to feel the inconvenience of my morning attendance. We had seldom breakfasted ourselves till ten; and the intervening hour was all the time that I could find in the whole day for writing, and occasionally it would happen that the half of that hour was all that I could secure for the purpose. But there was no remedy. Long usage had made that which at first was optional a point of good manners, and consequently of necessity, and I was forced to neglect 'The Task' to attend upon the Muse who had inspired the subject. But she had ill-health, and before I had quite finished the work was obliged to repair to Bristol. Thus, as I told you, my dear, the cause of the many interruptions that I mentioned was removed, and now, except the Bull [Mr. Bull] that I spoke of, we seldom have any company at all.

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After all that I have said upon this matter, you will not completely understand me, perhaps, unless I account for the remainder of the day. I will add, therefore, that, having paid my morning visit, I walked; returning from my walk, I dressed: we then met and dined, and parted not till between ten and eleven at night."

There is, however, a matter of which the poet has not spoken—two verses which "those who were acquainted with the unsuspecting innocence and sportive gaiety of Cowper would readily allow . . . are such as he might have addressed to a real sister." To Hayley "they appeared expressive of that peculiarity in his character, a gay and tender gallantry, perfectly distinct from amorous attachment." Her ladyship unfortunately, who knew the world so well, thought otherwise. The verses are entitled, "'To a Lady' who wore a lock of his hair set with diamonds."

Lady Austen gone, "The Task" progressed but Cowper's loneliness increased. For one brief moment the darkness lifted, alas! "a flash in a dark night during which the heavens seemed opened only to shut again." He was largely dependent on the society of Barber Wilson, who, when he turned Baptist, refused to dress Lady Austen's coiffure on Sundays; and strutting, pinched, pompous, but withal

¹ Four lines of the poem ran:

"The heart that beats beneath that breast
Is William's well I know,
A nobler prize and richer far
Than India could bestow."

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good-hearted, religious schoolmaster Teedon, who kept school in the Shiel Hall and a diary. With the Reverend Thomas Scott he was, we gather, on terms of no intimacy. He had, however, made the acquaintance of the Throckmortons, a Catholic family whose seat was at Weston Underwood, little more than a mile from Olney. Cowper, since his residence in the town, had been allowed a key of the park ; and when the possessor died in 1782, he sent a complimentary card to his successor¹ requesting the continuance of that privilege. This was granted, but the acquaintance did not extend beyond this correspondence. When interest in ballooning was aroused throughout the country, and Montgolfier was already a famous name and Lunardi soon to attract universal attention, among others interested in aeronautics were the Throckmortons. In May, 1784, the poet and Mrs. Unwin were invited to witness a balloon ascent from their grounds and entertained with the utmost politeness. Their hosts, who had lately "received many gross affronts from the people of this place on account of their religion," were at first shy with strangers ; but this friendship prospered. Cowper sang their praises to Unwin, to Newton, to Lady Hesketh : Throckmorton was a gentleman—a fact which gave the poet pleasure—a peerless neighbour, amiable and well informed ; and, priceless boon to bookless Cowper, the library was at his disposal.

¹ A younger brother, John Throckmorton, son of Sir Robert, who resided at the family seat of Bucklands in Berkshire. The old baronet died in 1791, and Cowper's friend succeeded to the title.

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Thus Lady Austen had barely flounced away, leaving our poet sore-hearted, when these new friends came into his life. For him they greatly lightened the burden.

While busied over "The Task" Cowper was reticent on the subject to Newton, who had exercised careful censorship over the earlier volume. He chronicled with inimitable grace small Olney happenings; he discussed his soul's state, discoursed on South Sea dancing and the vagaries of Geary Ball; but spoke no word of his design. October 11,¹ he dispatched his "four quires of verse" to Unwin, with instructions to offer the manuscript to Johnson, and, failing him, to Longman. October 30, he communicated his information to Newton casually, adding apologetically, "I mentioned it not sooner, because almost to the last I was doubtful whether I should ever bring it to a conclusion, working often in such distress of mind as, while it spurred me to the work, at the same time threatened to disqualify me for it." Newton was mortified, and refused to be pacified by hasty verses as was Unwin earlier; mortified enough, hard-working in his city charge, with a thousand-and-one ministerial harassments. He replied civilly enough, however, and sought further information; was refused the proof-sheets "absolutely, though civilly," but received a copy of the arguments and an extract. These he sharply criticized, taking exception to the blank verse and generally

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throwing cold water on the design. The poet replied with spirit. So for the moment the matter rested. In June 1785, while Carey,¹ who had joined Mr. Sutcliff's Baptist chapel at Olney, was preparing to preach his first sermon, the new volume, which included "Tirocinium," "John Gilpin," and the "Epistle to Joseph Hill," was in the hands of the public.

The poet had little ground for complaint with the reception of his new volume; its success was complete. His verse, if didactic, lacked the hard glitter of intellectualism: his devotional passages were acceptable to readers of his theological way of thinking, while his instinctive sympathy for the lower creation appealed to humanitarians:

I would not enter in my list of friends
(Though graced with polished manners and fine
~~sense,~~

Yet wanting sensibility) the man
Who needlessly sets foot upon a worm.

Cowper's poetry pulsed with human emotion; it throbbed with the charm of a sympathetic personality, and, if lacking the overmastering impulse compelling poetic activity, it possessed honesty and sincerity of purpose. As he wrote, Burns and Wordsworth stood already at the threshold: the forces were gathering which were presently to overwhelm convention in the chaos of revolution.

When the tumult of the outside world pene-

¹ William Carey, 1761-1834.

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trated beyond the closed shutters of Orchard Side, the poet, conscious of mighty national stirrings, of the weakness and the strength of the times, was consumed by passionate love of country :

England, with all thy faults, I love thee still,
My country ! and, while yet a nook is left
Where English minds and manners may be found,
Shall be constrained to love thee.

But his fire kindled slowly ; it gleamed dully,
neither illuminating fiercely nor warming.
Sombrely, he might trace in the woes of mankind
the divine punishment ; bemoan prodigies
and earthquakes ; in sadness write :

My ear is pained
My soul is sick with every day's report
Of wrong and outrage with which earth is filled ;

sentimentalism might tide over him, vaguely
conscious of universal movement and unrest
among the nations, heralding engulfing revolution :
but, not after this manner are world-moving
reformers fashioned ; not to such is given
to speak with cloven tongues. A Pisgah
sight he obtains, then descends again dully.

" The Task " resembles the conversation of
one dowered with no special gifts of intellect ;
of an interesting quiet man, of humour and
austerity with an intensely human hand-grip.
Now he is philosophical, now descriptive ; now
he grows grave, now waxes playful ; now he
emerges from the shadow into the sunshine and

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peace of soul is restored ; now he views with sympathy dull lives passed amid

The bay of curs
Incessant, clinking hammers, grinding wheels,
And infants clamorous whether pleased or pained ;
now he employs his brush on some calm interior;
now depicts

The waggoner who bears
The pelting brunt of the tempestuous night,
With half-shut eyes and puckered cheeks, and teeth
Presented bare against the storm.

His Puritanism, his primness of deportment, his uncompromising Evangelicism had repelled in the earlier volume. It is otherwise here.

When he wrote :

Retreat
Cannot indeed to guilty man restore
Lost innocence, or cancel follies past ;
But it has peace,

he was echoing Rousseau's teaching, in revolt against the cold bitterness of the uncomprehending world. But, like Crabbe, he does not lose hold on realism, and paints this portrait of Crazy Kate with minute pencil.

There often wanders one, whom better days
Saw better clad, in cloak of satin trimmed
With lace, and hat with splendid riband bound.
A serving-maid was she, and fell in love
With one who left her, went to sea, and died.
Her fancy followed him through foaming waves
To distant shores, and she would sit and weep

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At what a sailor suffers ; fancy too,
Delusive most where warmest wishes are,
Would oft anticipate his glad return,
And dream of transports she was not to know.
She heard the doleful tidings of his death,
And never smiled again. And now she roams
The dreary waste ; there spends the livelong day,
And there, unless when charity forbids,
The livelong night. A tattered apron hides,
Worn as a cloak, and hardly hides, a gown
More tattered still ; and both but ill conceal
A bosom heaved with never-ceasing sighs.
She begs an idle pin of all she meets,
And hoards them in her sleeve ; but needful food,
Though pressed with hunger oft, or comelier clothes,
Though pinched with cold, asks never. Kate is
crazed.

He boldly advocates temperance reform in the
" Winter Evening " :

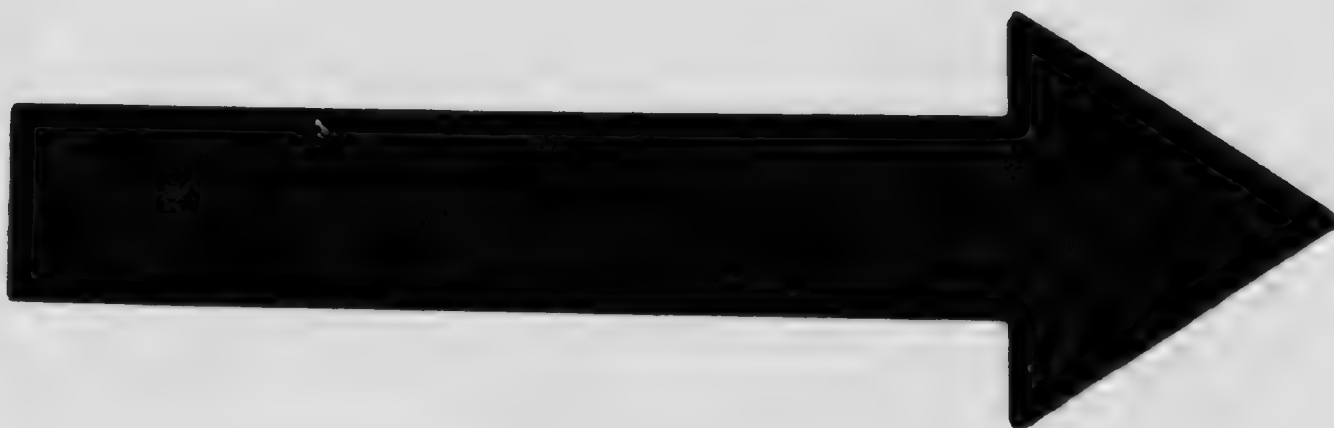
Pass where we may, through city or through town,
Village or hamlet, of this merry land,
Though lean and beggared, every twentieth pace
Conducts the unguarded nose to such a whiff
Of stale debauch, forth issuing from the styes
That law has licensed, as makes temperance reel.
There sit, involved and lost in curling clouds
Of Indian fume, and guzzling deep, the boor,
The lackey, and the groom ; the craftsman there
Takes a Lethæan leave of all his toil ;
Smith, cobbler, joiner, he that plies the shears,
And he that kneads the dough ; all loud alike,
All learnèd, and all drunk. The fiddle screams
Plaintive and piteous, as it wept and wailed
Its wasted tones and harmony unheard ;

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Fierce the dispute, whate'er the theme ; while she,
Fell Discord, arbitress of such debate,
Perched on the sign-post, holds with even hand
Her undecisive scales.

If erroneous his assumption, that a life of rural ease and leisure is more friendly to the cause of piety and virtue than a life of action, if he too often beats empty air petulantly, Cowper's abstract view of moral obliquity and his denunciations of the cancers of society are essentially sane and sound. But his zeal was apt to outrun his discretion ; he knew little in his still garden of what passed beyond his walls. He had fled from a world in which there was much that was beautiful and good, and, remembering only its sorrow and its pain, he frowned when he heard the sound of its innocent laughter. His reflections too frequently lacked the faculty of giving to think ; they were reflections such as Mrs. Unwin might have made, or the Reverend John Newton in the Olney parlour. But the Evangelical poet went further than Rousseau, who discovered that the rottenness in the existing scheme of things arose from man's departure from the ideal state of nature. He grows enthusiastic over liberty, prophesies the fall of the Bastille, defines the Whiggish attitude toward monarchy, essentially moderate and anti-revolutionary :

We love
The king who loves the law, respects his bounds,
And reigns content within them : him we serve



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Freely and with delight, who leaves us free :
But recollecting still that he is man,
We trust him not too far.

There is a higher emancipation. Nobler than
the patriot in the eyes of God is the martyr.

He is the freeman whom the truth makes free,
And all are slaves beside.

The regeneration of man and the extirpation of
existing evils was to be effected neither by
philosophic "rant and rhapsody in virtue's
praise" nor by drastic legislation. Calvinistic
Cowper, labouring under the burden of his
times, and convinced, in a darkening age, of
the corruption of man's whole nature, fell back
on an older remedy :

Acquaint thyself with God, if thou wouldst taste
His works. . . .

The soul that sees Him, or receives sublimed
New faculties, or learns at least to employ
More worthily the powers she owned before,
Discerns in all things what, with stupid gaze
Of ignorance, till then she overlooked,
A ray of heavenly light gilding all forms
Terrestrial, in the vast and the minute,
The unambiguous footsteps of the God
Who gives its lustre to an insect's wing,
And wheels His throne upon the rolling worlds.

So Cowper stands, backward looking and forward looking.

"My descriptions," he writes, "are all from
nature ; not one of them second-handed. My

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delineations of the heart are from my own experiences ; not one of them borrowed from books or in the least degree conjectural. In my numbers, which I varied as much as I could . . . I have imitated nobody, though sometimes perhaps there may be an apparent resemblance, because at the same time that I would not imitate I have not affectedly differed." His background is Olney scenery : the "Peasant's Nest," the chestnut avenue, the rustic bridge, the gulf

in which the willows dip
Their pendant boughs, stooping as if to drink,

the alcove, the sheepfold pouring out "its
fleece tenants o'er the glebe," the Wilderness
with well-rolled walks, the grove

Between the upright shafts of whose tall elms
We may discern the thresher at his task.

But, while one of the most rural, urbane Cowper was at the same time one of the least rustic of English poets. He makes no claim to mastery of wide artistic range, concentrating on minute details. He inserts no unnatural figure in his landscape ; every feature is natural and truthful, every line distinguished by his characteristic touch. He knows nothing of "natural magic." His unromantic disposition remained unaffected by the Ossianic vogue. The vague air of mystery, the melancholy pathos of Macpherson's lines, left him indifferent. He had no pleasure in the contemplation of lowering skies and

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melancholy valleys ; he had no knowledge of these emotions delineated by Wordsworth in the poet's progression :

The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion ; the tall rock,
The mountain and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms were then to me
An appetite.

Calmly and pensively he writes after this fashion :

Come, Evening, once again, season of peace ;
Return, sweet Evening, and continue long !
Methinks I see thee in the streaky west,
With matron step slow moving, while the Night
Treads on thy sweeping train ; one hand employed
In letting fall the curtain of repose
On bird and beast, the other charged for man
With sweet oblivion of the cares of day ;
Not sumptuously adorned, nor needing aid,
Like homely-featured Night, of clustering gems ;
A star or two just twinkling on thy brow
Suffices thee ; save that the moon is thine
No less than hers, not worn indeed on high
With ostentatious pageantry, but set
With modest grandeur in thy purple zone,
Resplendent less, but of an ampler round.
Come then, and thou shalt find thy votary calm,
Or make me so. Composure is thy gift : —
And whether I devote thy gentler hours
To books, to music, or the poet's toil ;
To weaving nets for bird-alluring fruit ;
Or twining silken threads round ivory reels,
When they command whom man was born to please ;
I slight thee not, but make thee welcome still.

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The pure delight in natural description evidenced in the following lines is characteristic as well of the minor Scottish poets ; but in them there is more of heart-break, more yearning for home scenes tenderly recollected through early association.

Thence with what pleasure have we just discerned
The distant plough slow moving, and beside
His labouring team, that swerved not from the track,
The sturdy swain diminished to a boy.

Here Ouse, slow winding through a level plain
Of spacious meads with cattle sprinkled o'er,
Conducts the eye along his sinuous course
Delighted. There, fast rooted in their bank,
Stand, never overlooked, our favourite elms,
That screen the herdsman's solitary hut ;
While far beyond, and overthwart the stream,
That, as with molten glass, inlays the vale,
The sloping land recedes into the clouds ;
Displaying on its varied side the grace
Of hedge-row beauties numberless, square tower,
Tall spire, from which the sound of cheerful bells
Just undulates upon the listening ear ;
Groves, heaths, and smoking villages remote.
Scenes must be beautiful which, daily viewed,
Please daily, and whose novelty survives
Long knowledge and the scrutiny of years
Praise justly due to those that I describe.

Nor rural sights alone, but rural sounds
Exhilarate the spirit, and restore
The tone of languid Nature. Mighty winds,
That sweep the skirt of some far-spreading wood
Of ancient growth, make music not unlike
The dash of Ocean on his winding shore,

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And lull the spirit while they fill the mind ;
Unnumbered branches waving in the blast,
And all their leaves fast fluttering, all at once.
Nor less composure waits upon the roar
Of distant floods, or on the softer voice
Of neighbouring fountain, or of rills that slip
Through the cleft rock, and chiming as they fall
Upon loose pebbles, lose themselves at length
In matted grass, that with a livelier green
Betrays the secret of their silent course.
Nature inanimate employs sweet sounds,
But animated nature sweeter still,
To soothe and satisfy the human ear.
Ten thousand warblers cheer the day, and one
The livelong night : nor these alone, whose notes
Nice-fingered art must emulate in vain,
But cawing rooks, and kites that swim sublime
In still repeated circles, screaming loud ;
The jay, the pie, and even the boding owl
That hails the rising moon, have charms for me.
Sounds inharmonious in themselves and harsh,
Yet heard in scenes where peace for ever reigns,
And only there, please highly for their sake.

“What there is of a religious cast in the volume I have thrown toward the end of it, for two reasons : first, that I might not revolt the reader at his entrance ; and secondly, that my best impressions might be made last. Were I to write as many volumes as Lope de Vega or Voltaire, not one of them would be without this tincture. If the world like it not, so much the worse for them. I make all the concessions I can, that I may please them, but I will not please them at the expense of conscience.”

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Cowper does not for one moment forget his self-imposed mission, but the satirical pen employed in "The Timepiece" is handled with less bitterness, with less morbidness. The flame of religion no longer burns fiercely. He has not receded one step from his earlier position; he has not abated one fraction in his hatred of pretence and hypocrisy and injustice; but time has toned him. He has become more mellow, more human. It is when he detects some tampering with the groundwork of his faith that he scourges indiscriminately the natural philosopher and the astronomer, and speaks in ignorance and censorious petulance. But the frail figure of these lines of pathos and personal appeal speedily obliterates momentary resentment and calls forth ungrudging sympathy:

I was a stricken deer that left the herd
Long since; with many an arrow deep infix'd
My panting side was charged, when I withdrew
To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.
There was I found by One who had Himself
Been hurt by the archers. In His side He bore,
And in His hands and feet, the cruel scars.
With gentle force soliciting the darts,
He drew them forth, and healed and bade me live.
Since then, with few associates, in remote
And silent woods I wander, far from those
My former partners of the peopled scene;
With few associates, and not wishing more.

We can picture the poet, as evening closes in,
rising at sound of the post-horn and crossing

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to his window shiveringly and peering out on the deserted market square. Barber Wilson's latest scandal retailed, schoolmaster Teedon's newest extravagance laughed over, the fire stirred, the shutters closed, the sofa wheeled round, the "loud hissing urn" throwing up its "steamy columns," he settles to his reading, perhaps to Cook or Forster or Hawkesworth—on which occasions his imagination is so captivated that he seems to partake with the navigators in all the dangers that they encountered. "I lose my anchor," he writes, "my mainsail is rent into shreds: I kill a shark, and by signs converse with a Patagonian, and all this without moving from the fireside." Call not this selfish; what had he to do in the world of activity? Not for him the burden. He picks up his pen idly, and, snug in his philosophy of retirement, permits himself indulgence in this pleasant contemplation.

Hark ! 'tis the twanging horn ! O'er yonder bridge,
That with its wearisome but needful length
Bestrides the wintry flood, in which the moon
Sees her unwrinkled face reflected bright,
He comes, the herald of a noisy world,
With spattered boots, strapped waist, and frozen locks,
News from all nations lumbering at his back. . . .

Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,
And while the bubbling and loud hissing urn
Throws up a steamy column, and the cups
That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,

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So let us welcome peaceful evening in.
Not such his evening, who with shining face
Sweats in the crowded theatre, and squeezed
And bored with elbow-points through both his sides,
Outscolds the ranting actor on the stage ;
Nor his, who patient stands till his feet throb,
And his head thumps, to feed upon the breath
Of patriots bursting with heroic rage,
Or placemen all tranquillity and smiles.
This folio of four pages, happy work !
Which not even critics criticize ; that holds
Inquisitive attention, while I read
Fast bound in chains of silence, which the fair,
Though eloquent themselves, yet fear to break ;
What is it but a map of busy life,
Its fluctuations, and its vast concerns ? . . .

'Tis pleasant through the loopholes of retreat
To peep at such a world ; to see the stir
Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd ;
To hear the roar she sends through all her gates
At a safe distance, where the dying sound
Falls a soft murmur on the uninjured ear.
Thus sitting, and surveying thus at ease
The globe and its concerns, I seem advanced
As some secure and more than mortal height,
That liberates and exempts me from them all.
It turns submitted to my view, turns round
With all its generations ; I behold
The tumult, and am still. The sound of war
Has lost its terrors ere it reaches me ;
Grieves, but alarms me not. I mourn the pride
And avarice that make man a wolf to man,
Hear the faint echo of those brazen throats,
By which he speaks the language of his heart,
And sigh, but never tremble at the sound.

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He travels and expatiates, as the bee
From flower to flower, so he from land to land ;
The manners, customs, policy of all
Pay contribution to the store he gleans ;
He sucks intelligence in every clime,
And spreads the honey of his deep research
At his return, a rich repast for me.
He travels, and I too. I tread his deck,
Ascend his topmast, through his peering eyes
Discover countries, with a kindred heart
Suffer his woes, and share in his escapes ;
While fancy, like the finger of a clock,
Runs the great circuit, and is still at home.

O Winter ! ruler of the inverted year,
Thy scattered hair with sleet like ashes filled,
Thy breath congealed upon thy lips, thy cheeks
Fringed with a beard made white with other snows
Than those of age, thy forehead wrapt in clouds,
A leafless branch thy sceptre, and thy throne
A sliding car, indebted to no wheels,
But urged by storms along its slippery way ;
I love thee, all unlovely as thou seemest,
And dreaded as thou art. Thou holdest the sun
A prisoner in the yet undawning east,
Shortening his journey between morn and noon,
And hurrying him, impatient of his stay,
Down to the rosy west ; but kindly still
Compensating his loss with added hours
Of social converse and instructive ease,
And gathering, at short notice, in one group
The family dispersed and fixing thought,
Not less dispersed by daylight and its cares.
I crown thee King of intimate delights,
Fireside enjoyments, home-born happiness,
And all the comforts that the lowly roof

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Of undisturbed retirement, and the hours
Of long uninterrupted evening know.

"The Winter Evening" contains his finest drawings; but scarcely less excellent is the limning of these lines in the "Winter Morning Walk":

The cattle mourn in corners where the fence
Screens them, and seem half-petrified to sleep
In unrecumbent sadness. There they wait
Their wonted fodder, not like hungering man,
Fretful if unsupplied, but silent, meek,
And patient of the slow-paced swain's delay,
He from the stack carves out the accustomed load,
Deep-plunging, and again deep-plunging oft,
His broad keen knife into the solid mass;
Smooth as a wall the upright remnant stands,
With such undeviating and even force
He severs it away: no needless care
Lest storms should overset the leaning pile
Deciduous, or its own unbalanced weight.
Forth goes the woodman, leaving unconcerned
The cheerful haunts of man, to wield the axe
And drive the wedge in yonder forest drear,
From morn to eve his solitary task.
Shaggy, and lean, and shrewd, with pointed ears
And tail cropped short, half lurcher and half cur,
His dog attends him. Close behind his heel
Now creeps he slow; and now with many a frisk
Wide scampering, snatches up the drifted snow
With ivory teeth, or ploughs it with his snout;
Then shakes his powdered coat, and barks for joy.
Heedless of all his pranks, the sturdy churl
Moves right toward the mark; nor stops for aught,
But now and then with pressure of his thumb

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To adjust the fragrant charge of a short tube
That fume, beneath his nose : the trailing cloud
Streams far behind him, scenting all the air.

Humour, pathos, tenderness, Cowper possessed in no small measure ; genuine nature love, an etcher's craft peculiar to himself. But there are moments when his passion for minute detail misleads him—when he descends to trifling doggerel or irregular and undignified prose, and dullness sits heavily. The staccato movement in the apostrophe to the metropolis at the close of the "Garden," for example, becomes intolerable. The lines, filled with commonness of expression, lose all dignity and restraint and become incredibly bald and feeble :

Ambition, avarice, penury incurred
By endless riot, vanity, the lust
Of pleasure and variety, despatch,
As duly as the swallows disappear,
The world of wandering knights and squires
town. . . .

'Tis the cruel gripe
That lean hard-handed Poverty inflicts,
The hope of better things, the chance to win,
The wish to shine, the thirst to be amused,
That at the sound of Winter's hoary wing
Unpeople all our counties of such herds
Of fluttering, loitering, cringing, begging, loose
And wanton vagrants, as make London, vast
And boundless as it is, a crowded coop.

Preposterous too, were it serious, is the celebrated line

The stable yields a stercoraceous heap

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or the already quoted sheepfold pouring out
"its fleecy tenants o'er the glebe."

But this same dull Cowper, who could not break wholly away from the atmosphere of his century, could withal at times ascend the heights. "Cowper," writes Christopher North in his thunderous manner, "the same man who was well satisfied to sit day after day beside an elderly lady sewing caps and tippets, except when he was obliged to go and water the flowers or feed the rabbits . . . goes forth in his holy ire like a man inspired and commissioned."¹

Buoyed on the wings of religious fervour and dowered with prophetic gift, he attains sublimity in this passage :

In the heart
No passion touches a discordant string,
But all is harmony and love. Disease
Is not : the pure and uncontaminate blood
Holds its due course, nor fears the frost of age.
One song employs all nations, and all cry
"Worthy the Lamb, for He was slain for us !"
The dwellers in the vales and on the rocks
Shout to each other, and the mountain-tops
From distant mountains catch the flying joy,
Till, nation after nation taught the strain,
Earth rolls the rapturous Hosanna round.
Behold the measure of the promise filled ;
See Salem built, the labour of a God !
Bright as a sun the sacred city shines ;
All kingdoms and all princes of the earth

¹ Essays.

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Flock to that light ; the glory of all lands
Flows into her ; unbounded is her joy,
And endless her increase.

Cowper's verse is not yet wholly liberated from that manner of poetic diction which was presently to bulk so largely in criticism. He still has the teaching of recent masters in mind, and does not disclaim the possibility of resemblance. In the passage just quoted, coloured as it is by faith, and faintly reflecting transcendental light, the Miltonic cadences are seldom absent from his ears. Few people had studied the Puritan poet more, or were more familiar with his poetry than himself.

Then Milton had indeed a poet's charms :
New to my taste, his Paradise surpassed
The struggling efforts of my boyish tongue
To speak its excellence ; I danced for joy.
I marvelled much that, at so ripe an age
As twice seven years, his beauties had then first
Engaged my wonder, and admiring still,
And still admiring, with regret supposed
The joy half lost because not sooner found.¹

But Cowper's verse is stamped with his own peculiar seal ; his " panther quest " was an unadorned simplicity. " The two most renowned writers of history the present day has seen " disgust him always : " Robertson with his pomp and his strut, and Gibbon with his finical and French manners." ² To Unwin he laments that " simplicity is become a very rare

¹ " The Winter Evening," ll. 709-717. ² To Newton, July 27, 1783.

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quality in a writer . . . Swift and Addison were simple ; Pope knew how to be so, but was frequently tinged with affectation : since their day I hardly know a celebrated writer who deserves that character." The achievement of Cowper, although he did not produce a poem of the first rank, was, despite Goldsmith's strictures on the measure, to render blank verse once more possible. Than Milton he sought no better model ; and, after his fashion, he restored to poetry an unadorned simplicity.

VI

THE "Task" brought Byron's "coddled poet" fame. Every one read it, quoted from it, made haste to purchase copies. Acquaintances who had ignored his existence for a quarter of a century remembered him suddenly. From Mr. Bacon and Mr. Barham he received "two very flattering letters of thanks" : Mr. Teedon read the volume and, fearful lest the poet should overlook some of them, pointed out all its beauties. Mr. William Churchey, a Welsh attorney, submitted a volume of verses to his judgment ; letters poured in from all quarters—odes, invitations, flatterings. From Newton—whose last expressed perfect satisfaction with the propriety of his proceedings as to the publication, so healing the breach—warm praise gratefully accepted. Lord Dartmouth thanked him for

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the volume "in part read," adding "that the specimen has made him impatient for the whole." A judicious friend in London, who was unknown to Newton, spake him kindly word of eulogy.

Cheerfully might the poet play his battledore and shuttlecock and ring his "thousand bob-majors" on his dumb-bells, gaily now propound his riddles, and the blue-grey eyes lose somewhat of their melancholy and his bag-wig sit complacently. His the right to rub complacent hands. He had won him fame.

His relations bought their copies of "The Task," the lines of which were in everybody's mouth, and asked each other at their tea drinkings whether this was the same melancholy failure they had chosen to forget. For years no word had passed between them and the now famous poet. From Ashley Cowper and the General¹ came his regular allowance—but no further dealings. From time to time reports filtered through to them, little pleasing, barely encouraging, and so the silence remained unbroken. Cowper had lived his life, formed new ties, and followed his own path. Rarely has madness driven poet to poetry; but in his instance "despair made amusement necessary," and he found in verse the most agreeable diversion. Had Cowper not gone mad, he would never have formed acquaintance with the Unwins. Had not Unwin senior met with his fatal accident and John Newton paid his visit

¹ General (late Colonel) Cowper.

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of condolence to the family, we should never have had the "Olney Hymns," and it is unlikely that the poet would ever have found a publisher for the "Satires"—had he ever written them. Had he not happened to look out of his window one dull day and chanced to see Lady Austen, we would never have had "The Task"; and had he not broken with Lady Austen, the poem would probably have remained unfinished and our poetry have been as a consequence vastly the poorer. Had he faced the ordeal of public examination and emerged triumphantly, he might have dozed and prosed away his days among the Lords, and done no more than write love verses to Theodora, and married her in time, and taken the waters at Bath, and been patronized by poor Beau Nash, who cut such a melancholy figure in his abject age, or made up his party to hear Whitefield or the popular preacher supplying the chapel for the day, as was for a time the craze among the fashionable, and attended the routs at Brooks's, and dined and wined with Chancellor Thurlow, and rubbed shoulders with brilliant Sheridan, and been on terms with Dr. Johnson, and talked history with ponderous Gibbon, and lost more than he could well afford to seductive Charles Fox, and shaken hands with Scotch Smollett, and sniggered over some joke of scandalous Sterne, or chuckled over one of Henry Fielding's broad stories. He might have gamed and diced, and given sentiments and drunk perdition to the Stuarts like a loyal Whig, and trounced the

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watch and developed into a respectable man of fashion with a comfortable bank account and a select dinner list. But the world held no place for Cowper.

Now, however, Lady Hesketh—widowed these three years—read “John Gilpin” and broke a silence uninterrupted since she quitted England with her husband in '67.¹ She recalled earlier days in Southampton Row, and whispers of love vows to a certain Theodora; she had visions of a genteel young beau, perhaps “Giles Gingerbread,” who

Sometimes said, or tried to say,
A witty thing or two;

she remembered tales of the Westminster Club dinners, of nonsense-mongering and drollery; and, sitting down, dispatched her belated letter. The gap caused in the lonely life by Lady Austen's departure was filled. A rush of memory overwhelmed the poet, and ardent affection, which neither time nor sorrow had obliterated, revived. Thus he replied in transported mood: “My dear cousin,—It is no new thing with you to give pleasure; but I will venture to say that you do not often give more than you gave me this morning. When I came down to breakfast and found upon the table a letter franked by my uncle, and when opening that frank I found that it contained a letter from you, I said within myself: ‘This is just as it should be. We are all grown young

¹ Sir Thomas Hesketh, d. 1782.

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again, and the days that I thought I should see no more are actually returned.' You perceive, therefore, that you judged well when you conjectured that a line from you would not be disagreeable to me. It could not be otherwise than, as in fact it proved, a most agreeable surprise, for I can truly boast of an affection for you that neither years nor interrupted intercourse have at all abated. I need only recollect how much I valued you once, and with how much cause, immediately to feel a revival of the same value—if that can be said to revive which at the most has only been dormant for the want of employment. But I slander it when I say that it has slept. A thousand times have I recollected a thousand scenes, in which our two selves have formed the whole of the drama, with the greatest pleasure; at times, too, when I had no reason to suppose that I should ever hear from you again." ¹

Sensible Lady Hesketh, shrewd character-reader with no trace of Lady Austen's butterfly nature, remembering her cousin's circumstances and that these long years of separation were like to have been lean years, made, in her practical manner, tactful and judicious inquiries into the state of the Olney finances. The poet replied frankly. Mrs. Unwin and he had one common purse; but lately their income had been reduced, and they had been compelled to deny themselves certain trifling luxuries. He

October 12, 1785.

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was unaware that Mrs. Powley¹ had declared that £1800 had been wasted on him! when he wrote to Lady Hesketh: "Strain no points to your own inconvenience or hurt, for there is no need of it; but indulge yourself in communicating (no matter what) that you can spare without missing it, since by so doing you will be sure to add to the comforts of my life one of the sweetest that I can enjoy—a token and proof of your affection." Presently a letter arrived over which the poet made a great fuss—perhaps from Theodora, still cherishing a first love. It was anonymous and puzzled him vastly; but what was important was that it made him "a present of an annuity of £50 a year." Besides, there arrived by the Wellingborough coach "a most elegant writing-desk," a snuff-box with three hares ornamenting, a pocket-book, and a watch-chain. Never had the poet been so deluged with gifts. He penned his letters gaily, but never so gaily as when he wrote to Lady Hesketh. And for the moment no shadow fell across his page.

In November an old schoolfellow, Mr. Bagot—Rector of Blithfield, brother of the bishop complimented in "Tirocinium"—paid a welcome visit and learned of a fresh design. Cowper was engaged in a new translation of Homer, which he had decided to publish by subscription. Bagot subscribed a draft of £20 and promised his whole interest to enure the success of the

¹ Mrs. Unwin's daughter Susanua. Married Rev. Matthew Powley, May 5, 1774.

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venture. The poet, after hesitation, wrote to Thurlow and Colman—not yet forgiven—and received from the latter “the most affectionate letter imaginable.” To Lady Hesketh he communicated “the great secret”—so great that she “must not whisper it to her cat”;¹ this when “on the point of finishing the twenty-first book of the ‘Iliad.’” Chance led to the execution of a design long familiar. The last proof-sheet of “The Task” corrected and packed off to Johnson; “Tirocinium” done with; the “Epistle to Joseph Hill” polished to his satisfaction; time hung heavily, and melancholy settled anew. One day, being “in such distress of mind as was hardly supportable,”² he picked up his “Iliad” listlessly and translated the first dozen lines. Employment was essential; returning to his author again and again, he presently discovered he had filled a considerable number of sheets. The work was pleasant; it provided constant occupation; so he made his decision. For Homer he bore unchanging love. At Westminster he read the “Odyssey” and the “Iliad” with his school-fellow Sutton, and again in the Temple with lazy, forgetful Alston. For Pope as a translator he entertained the heartiest contempt; disgusted to find, when he looked for “the simplicity and majesty of Homer in his English representation, puerile conceits instead, extravagant metaphors, and the tinsel of modern embellishment in every possible position.” So

¹ November 9, 1783.

November 12, 1784.

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to Rowley later.¹ In August 1785 he had a letter in the "Gentleman's Magazine" attacking Pope's translation under the pseudonym "Alethes." He informed Unwin of the scheme² and justified the attempt to Hill.³ To this latter : "Knowing it to have been universally the opinion of the 'literati,' ever since they have allowed themselves to consider the matter coolly, that a translation, properly so called, of Homer is, notwithstanding what Pope has done, a desideratum in the English language, it struck me that an attempt to supply the deficiency would be an honourable one, and having made myself, in former years, somewhat critically a master of the original, I was by this double consideration induced to make the attempt myself." Fuseli, to whom specimens were submitted, reported favourably on the work ; Maty, of the British Museum, adversely hurling the poet into the depths. Colman, who had translated Terence, spoke appreciatively and poured balm on his wounded spirits ; but the venture caused endless heart-breaks. In January 1786 he had finished the "Iliad" ; but finding in it little satisfaction, set about the task of retranslation. Henceforth constant dreary chiselling and polishing. The "Odyssey" he began on September 24, 1788. On September 8, 1790, the manuscript was forwarded to the publisher ; but small thanks had the poet of his toil. Wearily he wrote : "Thus have I been held in constant employment, I know not

¹ February 21, 1788. ² October 22, 1785. December 24, 1785.

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exactly how many, but I believe these six years, an interval of eight months excepted. It is now become so familiar to me to take Homer from my shelf at a certain hour that I shall, no doubt, continue to take him from my shelf at the same time, even after I have ceased to want him. That period is not far distant. I am now giving the last touches to a work which, had I foreseen the difficulty of it, I should never have meddled with, but which, having at length nearly finished it to my mind, I shall discontinue with regret." ¹ Earlier he had written :

But slighted as it is, and by the great
Abandoned, and, which still I more regret,
Infected with the manners and the modes
It knew not once, the country wins me still.
I never framed a wish, or formed a plan
That flattered me with hopes of earthly bliss,
But there I laid the scene. There early strayed
My fancy, ere yet liberty of choice
Had found me, or the hope of being free.
My very dreams were rural, rural too
The first-born efforts of my youthful muse,
Sportive, and jingling her poetic bells
Ere yet her ear was mistress of their powers.
No bard could please me but whose lyre was tuned
To Nature's praises. Heroes and their feats
Fatigued me, never weary of the pipe
Of Tityrus, assembling as he sang
The rustic throng beneath his favourite beech.²
Now he walked the country while Homer buzzed
in his head, working irreparable mischief to his

¹ May 2, 1790. To Joseph Hill.

² "The Winter Evening," ll. 691-708.

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poetic talents. He ploughed and sowed on the plains of Troy to small purpose.

Cowper advocating the cause of the slaves, voiced the sentiments of the humanitarians; Cowper writing "The Task," gave expression to the creed of the Evangelicals. He himself might express gratification at the reception accorded the two quarto volumes,¹ gleefully pocket the thousand pounds Johnson allowed him, set himself lightly to render the "*Batrachomyomachia*"; but his translation of Homer supplied no felt want, and, despite his vindication, gave satisfaction to none. A sound critical principle underlay his work. He aimed at faithful rendering of his original, and, by insistence on this, loaded his translation with dull, inharmonious, tasteless lines. When he wrote, "The similitude of Milton's manner to that of Homer is such that no person familiar with both can read either without being reminded of the other; and it is in those breaks and pauses to which the numbers of the English poet are so much indebted, both for their dignity and variety, that he chiefly copies the Grecian," it is evident that he is labouring under a complete misapprehension. His verse, unlike that of Pope, moves slowly. "Between Cowper and Homer," Mr. Arnold says, "there is interposed the mist of Cowper's elaborate Miltonic manner, entirely alien to the flowing rapidity of Homer."² He rarely escapes the trammels of his model, or rises above unforceful medioc-

¹ Published July 1, 1791.

On translating Homer.

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ity ; and despite a certain dignity which he succeeds in imparting, he renders few passages with consummate harmony of expression. His verse imparts a movement entirely alien to Homer ; it has lost his poetic quality, failed to reproduce his poetic essence. He was dissatisfied with the result himself, recognizing that his version was "deficient in the grace of ease" ; but when, in 1793, Mr. Thomas Park presented him with Chapman (whose translation, Coleridge declared, "will give you small use of Homer"), the verdict ran : "I know not whether the book be a rarity, but a curiosity it certainly is. I have as yet seen but little of it—enough, however, to make one wonder that any man with so little taste for Homer or apprehension of his manner should think it worth while to undertake the laborious task of translating him."

But Cowper's denunciation of Chapman matters little, and his own translation is of interest merely to the specialist student of literature. What is of importance from the critical view-point is that, despite Johnson and the tradition of the century, he is here entering a plea for ~~simplicity~~, directing vigorous assault against artifice in poetic diction, hurling his forces against rhetoric.¹ A thousand pities that this "most interesting man and excellent poet," seduced into belief in his supereminent qualification for the solution of the difficulties of Homeric translation,

Elton, "Survey of English Literature," vol. i, p. 96.

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should have saddled himself in these latter years with his burden and numbed finer faculties. This is Cowper at his worst.

Now cast the lot for all—Who wins the chance
Shall yield Achaia service, and himself
Serve also, if successful he escape
This brunt of hostile hardiment severe,
So Nestor. They, inscribing each his lot,
Into the helmet cast it of the son
Of Atreus, Agamemnon. Then the host
Pray'd all, their hands uplifting, and with eyes
To the wide heavens directed, many said.

Excellent enough but un-Homeric the "hostile hardiment." When Cowper sings of Homeric strut and strife he pants and staggers, incapable of grace and control. But in such a passage as the following, with its slow lingering movement, where the impressiveness of the scene is stamped on the poetic mind, his peculiar qualities find scope for their exercise. Thus the description of Calypso's Isle :

He ended, nor the Argicide refused,
Messenger of the skies ; his sandals fair,
Ambrosial, golden, to his feet he bound,
Which o'er the moist wave, rapid as the wind,
Bear him, and o'er the illimitable earth ;
Then took his rod with which, at will, all eyes
He closes soft or opes them wide again.
So arm'd, forth flew the valiant Argicide.
Alighting on Pieria, down he stoop'd
To Ocean, and the billows lightly skimm'd
In form a sea-mew, such as, in the bays

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Tremendous of the barren Deep her food
Seeking, dips oft in brine her ample wing.
In such disguise o'er many a wave he rode,
But reaching, now, that isle remote, forsook
The azure Deep, and at the spacious grot,
Where dwelt the amber-tressed nymph, arrived
Found her within. A fire on all the hearth
Blazed sprightly, and, afar-diffused, the scent
Of smooth-split cedar and of cypress-wood
Odorous, burning, cheer'd the happy isle.
She, busied at the loom, and plying fast
Her golden shuttle, with melodious voice
Sat chaunting there ; a grove on either side,
Alder and poplar, and the redolent branch
Widespread of Cypress, skirted dark the cave.
There many a bird of broadest pinion built
Secure her nest, the owl, the kite, and daw
Long-tongued, frequenter of the sandy shores.
A garden-vine luxuriant on all sides,
Mantled the spacious cavern, cluster-hung
Profuse ; four fountains of serenest lymph,
Their sinuous course pursuing side by side,
Stray'd all around, and everywhere appear'd
Meadows of softest verdure, purpled o'er
With violets ; it was a scene to fill
A God from heaven with wonder and delight.
Hermes, Heaven's messenger, admiring stood
That sight, and having all survey'd, at length
Enter'd the grotto ; nor the lovely nymph
Him knew not soon as seen, for not unknown
Each to the other the Immortals are,
How far soever separate their abodes.
Yet found he not within the mighty Chief,
Ulysses ; he sat weeping on the shore,
Forlorn—for there his custom was with groans

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Of sad regret to afflict his breaking heart,
Looking continual o'er the barren Deep.

Meanwhile the poet took snuff with Mrs. Unwin from their silver box ; wrote his letters at his card-table, pounce-box ready at hand ; had his interests in the town ; made new friends ; and had a kindly eye for their weaknesses as well as his own. Presently there was a flutter of excitement at Orchard Side ; Lady Hesketh had promised a visit. On February 9, 1788, the middle-aged poet wrote in ecstasies : " And now, my dear " (what infinite pleasure this correspondence gave our poet ! how bright those letters to her ladyship !), " let me tell you once more that your kindness in promising us a visit has charmed us both. I shall see you again. I shall hear your voice. We shall take walks together (pleasant enough these walks to Weston but lonely at times). I will show you my prospects, the hovel, the alcove, the Ouse, and its banks, everything that I have described. I anticipate the pleasure of those days not very far distant, and feel a part of it at this moment." The vicarage was to be her ladyship's lodging ; she arrived with her suite and, after separation of a quarter of a century, the cousins met again. Quietly her ladyship took stock ; she studied Mrs. Unwin, and wrote thus to Theodora : " She is very far from grave ; on the contrary, she is cheerful and gay, and laughs *de bon cœur* upon the smallest provocation. Amidst all the little Puritanical words which fall from her *de temps*

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en temps she seems to have by nature a great fund of gaiety—great, indeed, must it have been not to have been totally overcome by the close confinement in which she has lived, and the anxiety she must have undergone for one whom she certainly loves as well as one human being can love another. I will not say she idolizes him, because that she would think wrong, but she certainly seems to possess the truest regard and affection for this excellent creature, and, as I before said, has in the most liberal sense of those words no will or shadow of inclination but what is *his*. My account of Mrs. Unwin may seem, perhaps, to you, on comparing my letters, contradictory ; but when you consider that I began to write at the moment and at the first moment that I saw her, you will not wonder. Her character develops itself by degrees ; and though I might lead you to suppose her grave and melancholy, she is not so by any means. When she speaks of a grave subject, she does express herself with a Puritanical tone and in Puritanical expressions, but on all other subjects she seems to have a great disposition to cheerfulness and mirth ; and indeed, had she not, she could not have gone through all that she has. I must say, too, that she seems to be very well read in the English poets, as appears by several little quotations which she makes from time to time, and has a true taste for what is excellent in that way. There is something truly affectionate and sincere in her manner. No one can express more heartily

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than she does her joy to have me at Olney ; and as 'his must be for his sake, it is an additional proof of her regard and esteem for him.'"

The poet rode in her ladyship's carriage, in green and buff, with, doubtless, dog Mungo—immediate predecessor of immortal dog Beau—by his side. Her ladyship and Mrs. Unwin went about among the Olney poor ; and in the evenings, while his letters were being written and his Homeric verses polished, the ladies knitted and gossiped and Lady Hesketh came to appreciate Mrs. Unwin more and more, and mutual affection grew. She talked sensibly to the poet on the subject of his obsession, and anxious Mrs. Unwin saw him led into a tranquilliser frame of mind. Presently the Olney tongues began to wag ; gossips carried tales to London and honest Newton learned astounding news. Respected Cowper has turned *debauché*—Fapist. Down he sat without reflection and penned a rash letter to the backslider. Cowper replied with bitter words ; rendered an account of his doings, justifying himself. Rash Newton reflected ; remembering the Olney folk, he attempted to sift the evidence, and, finding it worthless, admitted error and the surface settled once more.

But while Lady Hesketh expressed satisfaction with everything she found in Olney, on one thing she was determined : the poet, with his income increased now by a clear £100, must quit the dull Olney house and find him pleasanter quarters ; he must have cheerful

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society, and longer walks than his thirty yards of gravel permit. A vacant house at Weston Underwood, the property of the Throckmortons, was taken, and July 3, he announced the expected removal to Unwin, anticipating the pleasure that proximity to the Throckmortons would confer. Lady Hesketh had convinced him that the house was insanitary, that the air of Olney was insalubrious. "Here we have no neighbourhood, there we shall have most agreeable neighbours in the Throckmortons. Here we have a bad air in winter, impregnated with the fishy-smelling fumes of the marsh miasma; there we shall breathe in an atmosphere untainted. Here we are confined from September to March, and sometimes longer; there we shall be upon the very verge of pleasure-grounds in which we can always ramble, and shall not walk through almost impassable dirt to get at them."

To Bagot and to Newton he wrote severely of Olney, ascribing his maladies to the "atmosphere enlumbered with raw vapours" issuing "from flooded meadows," and to a cellar waterlogged for months.

The presence of Lady Hesketh, the society of the Throckmortons, his translation, distracted him; he was composed and gay; but the shadow lay across his path. Once, before her ladyship visited Olney, he wrote: "I began to hope that, having walked the whole breadth of the bottom of this Red Sea, I was beginning to climb the opposite shore, and I prepared to

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sing the song of Moses. But I have been disappointed ; these hopes have been blasted ; these comforts have been wrested from me." In November 1786 the poet and his companion were settled in Weston, and it was not without regret that they left the poor dreary barracks at Orchard Side after nineteen years.

Despite the departure of Lady Hesketh, they were for the moment happy enough ; but while visitors came and went and Homer progressed, a terrible blow was pending. Unwin, excellent, amiable, genuine Unwin, loving son, sincere friend, travelling in the West with Henry Thornton, was stricken with typhus at Winchester ; and scarcely was the news received when the melancholy tidings arrived that he had passed away.¹ To the sorely tried couple in their sorrow came kindly William Bull ; and, the first transport of sorrow past, they fought their battle nobly. New friends were constantly made, many of them of the truest—Young Higgins, for example, who did some drawings for the poet's study and was a great admirer of his work. On January 18, 1787, came on his first visit Samuel Rose, son of the Chiswick schoolmaster, on his way from London to Glasgow University, bearing the "thanks of some of the Scotch professors" for Cowper's two volumes. He it was, invaluable transcriber of Homer, who, coming six miles out of his way to visit the poet, introduced him to the poetry of Burns. Later² Clotworthy Rowley, his old

¹ November 29, 1786.

² December 1787.

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fellow Templar, "one of the most benevolent and friendly creatures in the world," renewed acquaintance from Dublin; Thurlow and the poet exchanged letters on the subject of the translation of Homer; James Hurdis, author of the "Village Curate," corresponded amiably with him, as did Thomas Park, author of "Sonnets and Miscellaneous Poems," Carwardine, and William Hayley.

But even as young Rose was presenting his credentials the poet was at grips with his deadliest foe. The "little nervous feeling" he had lately experienced developed ominously: Homer progressed slowly: before the month¹ was out the enemy had him by the throat, and for six months there was the silence and blackness of death. He again attempted suicide by hanging, refused to see a human face except Mrs. Unwin's, was morose and unmanageable. Then the cloud lifted with startling suddenness; he renewed his interrupted correspondence with Lady Hesketh; acknowledged the "Lounger," and announced August 30: "My health and spirits seem to be mending daily: . . . I use exercise and take the air in the park and wilderness: I read much but as yet write not. Our friends at the Hall make themselves more and more amiable in our account, by treating us rather as old friends than as friends newly acquired. There are few days in which we do not meet, and I am now almost as much at home in their house as in our own." Their

¹ January 1787.

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kindness was without bounds. Cowper, vastly in their debt, repaid them after a poet's fashion, with verses.

In November of this year ¹ a new honour was conferred on the poet. The clerk of All Saints, Northampton, walked to Weston to implore the assistance of his muse in writing the verses annexed to the bill of mortality for the parish, published at Christmas. Cowper suggested, "There is a namesake of yours in particular, Cox the statuary, who, everybody knows, is a first-rate maker of verse. He surely is the man of all the world for your purpose." "Alas!" was the reply, "I have heretofore borrowed help from him; but he is a gentleman of so much reading that the people of our town cannot understand him." This flattery the poet could not resist; he accepted office and performed his onerous duties during several years.

The promised visit of Lady Hesketh in the spring of 1788 was unavoidably postponed; but in July he had Newton with him, and to the company was presently added Rose, who transcribed the twelfth book of the "Iliad." October found him once more at Weston in company with Lady Hesketh.² In January 1790 the poet formed a new acquaintance. At Weston arrived a relative—"a sweet lad, but as shy as a bird"—Mr. John Johnson,³ with a volume of poems in manuscript, which he read to the poet. Johnson, then at Caius College studying

¹ 1787.

² P. Rose's letter dated October 23, 1788.

³ Son of Catharine Donne, the poet's cousin.

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with a view to taking Orders—a lively enough, scatter-brained, fiddle-playing young fellow, had some copying set him—part of the "Odyssey," which he had never read, and formed an enduring friendship. To the spring of this year possibly belong those beautiful lines to Mrs. Unwin :¹

Mary ! I want a lyre with other strings,
Such aid from Heaven as some have feigned they
drew,
An eloquence scarce given to mortals, new
And undebased by praise of meaner things,
That, ere through age or woe I shed my wings,
I may record thy worth with honour due,
In verse as musical as thou art true,
And that immortalizes whom it sings.
But thou hast little need. There is a book
By seraphs writ with beams of heavenly light,
On which the eyes of God not rarely look,
A chronicle of actions just and bright :
There all thy deeds, my faithful Mary, shine,
And, since thou own'st that praise, I spare thee
mine.

Toward the end of February he received Mrs. Bodham's gift of the miniature of his mother, and by March 12 his heart-moving lines were composed ; finished "not without tears."

To this period belong many of his finest short pieces ; and when the Laureateship was fallen vacant, Lady Hesketh approached her kinsman with a view to submitting his name as a candi-

Wright, p. 511.

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date for the office. But the poet took fright at the bare suggestion; the mere thought of publicity, of kissing hands at Court. "I thank thee for the offer of thy best services on this occasion. But Heaven guard my brows from the wreath you mention, whatever wreath beside may hereafter adorn them! It would be a leaden extinguisher clapped on all the fire of my genius, and I should never more produce a line worth reading. To speak seriously, it would make me miserable, and therefore I am sure that thou, of all my friends, wouldst least wish me to wear it." Hayley, of whom we shall presently further hear, likewise declined the office, which was in the end accepted by Pye.

Among the pieces of lighter texture belonging to this period are the five slave ballads,¹ which the poet, remembering he had already "borne his testimony" in favour of his black brethren, produced after much hesitation; the poem "On the Queen's Visit to London";² "The Dog and the Water-Lily," immortalizing dog Beau; and several reviews. As a writer of light verse Cowper is the very perfection of natural grace and neatness. Line follows line, clause succeeds clause, verse connects verse, with unmatched facility and perfection of witty phrasing. Nothing could appear more simple than his excellent fables with their irreproachable moral, or the lines which a hundred-and-one trifling incidents call forth. Now a halibut sets the rhymes jingling through his brain;

¹ Spring 1788.

March 17, 1789.

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now a mischievous bull occasions half a dozen stanzas ; now a viper killed in his garden inspires twenty couplets written in excellent spirits ; now the receipt of a patchwork quilt from Mrs. King is gracefully acknowledged ; now a compliment to Mrs. Throckmorton facilely penned ; now to a cat, shut up accidentally in a drawer by Susan Wheeler, we owe thanks for a droll thing typically Cowper's with a sound moral attached. " The Flattening-Mill " illustrates this extraordinary metrical aptness :

When a bar of pure silver or ingot of gold
Is sent to be flatted or wrought into length,
It is passed between cylinders often, and rolled
In an engine of utmost mechanical strength.

Thus tortured and squeezed, at last it appears
Like a loose heap of ribbon, a glittering show,
Like music it tinkles and rings in your ears,
And warmed by the pressure, is all in a glow.

This process achieved, it is doomed to sustain
The thump after thump of a gold-beater's mallet,
And at last is of service in sickness or pain
To cover a pill for a delicate palate.

Alas for the poet ! who dares undertake
To urge reformation of national ill——
His head and his heart are both likely to ache
With the double employment of mallet and mill.

If he wish to instruct, he must learn to delight ;
Smooth, ductile, and even, his fancy must flow,
Must tinkle and glitter like gold to the sight,
And catch in its progress a sensible glow.

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After all, he must beat it as thin and as fine
As the leaf that enfolds what an invalid swallows ;
For truth is unwelcome, however divine,
And unless you adorn it, a nausea follows.

But in other work he sounds a deeper note. These lines "To the Nightingale," filled with sad suggestion, are in advance of his age ; they ring out in complete emancipation and touch high poetry. Cowper enters here unfamiliar poetical territory with fuller understanding ; it is as if he had learned in advance from Wordsworth.

Whence is it, that amazed I hear
From yonder withered spray,
The foremost morn of all the year,
The melody of May ?

And why, since thousands would be proud
Of such a favour shown,
Am I selected from the crowd,
To witness it alone ?

Sing'st thou, sweet Philomel, to me,
For that I also long
Have practised in the groves like thee,
Though not like thee, in song ?

Or sing'st thou rather, under force
Of some divine command,
Commissioned to presage a course
Of happier days at hand ?

Thrice welcome then ! for many a long
And joyless year have I,
As thou to-day, put forth my song
Beneath a wintry sky.

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But thee no wintry skies can harm,
Who only need'st to sing,
To make even January charm,
And every season Spring.

Unfamiliar too is the Byronic note sounded
in "The Shrubbery":

O! Happy Shades! to me unblest!
Friendly to peace, but not to me!
How ill the scene that offers rest,
And heart that cannot rest, agree! . . .

Me fruitful scenes and prospects waste
Alike admonish not to roam;
These tell me of enjoyments past,
And those of sorrows yet to come.

His art of phrase-turning never failed. Perfect
too after its fashion is "The Needless Alarm,"
the lines on the "Solitude of Alexander Sel-
kirk," despite Wordsworth's carping at the
"church-going bell," or the nobly phrased
"Boadicea" with its vibrant note of passion.

BOADICEA: AN ODE

When the British warrior queen,
Bleeding from the Roman rods,
Sought, with an indignant mien,
Counsel of her country's gods,

Sage beneath a spreading oak
Sat the Druid, hoary chief,
Every burning word he spoke
Full of rage and full of grief.

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Princess ! if our aged eyes
Weep upon thy matchless wrongs,
'Tis because resentment ties
All the terrors of our tongues.

Rome shall perish,—write that word
In the blood that she has spilt ;
Perish hopeless and abhorred,
Deep in ruin as in guilt.

Rome for empire far renowned,
Tramples on a thousand states ;
Soon her pride shall kiss the ground,
Hark ! the Gaul is at her gates.

Other Romans shall arise,
Heedless of a soldier's name,
Sounds, not arms, shall win the prize,
Harmony the path to fame.

Then the progeny that springs
From the forests of our land,
Armed with thunder, clad with wings,
Shall a wider world command.

Regions Cæsar never knew
Thy posterity shall sway,
Where his eagles never flew,
None invincible as they.

Such the bard's prophetic words
Pregnant with celestial fire,
Bending as he swept the chords
Of his sweet but awful lyre.

She, with all a monarch's pride,
Felt them in her bosom glow ;
Rushed to battle, fought and died,
Dying, hurled them at the foe.

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Ruffians, pitiless as proud,
 Heaven awards the vengeance due ;
 Empire is on us bestowed ;
 Shame and ruin wait for you.

In one of these occasional pieces ("The Cast-away") the tragedy of a life stands revealed, closing in sorrow and infinite despair.

Homer in the publisher's hands, the poet grew restless. Lady Hesketh proposed that he should write on the "Mediterranean," which fortunately, pleading ignorance, he declined. The Reverend John Buchanan, his Weston neighbour, suggested the "Four Ages of Man." Cowper heard his ideas on the subject, grew enthusiastic as was his fashion, wrote thirty-eight lines without design, and then abandoned the attempt.¹ Suggestions poured in but the original fount had failed. "Yardley Oak" attained, in detached lines, dignity and eloquence ; but Cowper lacked the imaginative quality requisite for the elevated treatment of his theme. Yet this blank verse is the highest expression of his technique.

Thought cannot spend itself, comparing still
 The great and little of thy lot, thy growth
 From almost nullity into a state
 Of matchless grandeur, and declension thence,
 Slow, into such magnificent decay.
 Time was when, settling on thy leaf, a fly
 Could shake thee to the root—and time had been
 When tempests could not . . .

May 1791.

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Thine arms have left thee. Winds have rent them
off

Long since, and rovers of the forest wild
With bow and shaft have burnt them. Some have
left

A splintered stump, bleached to a snowy white :
And some memorial none, where once they grew.
Yet life still lingers in thee, and puts forth
Proof not contemptible of what she can,
Even where death predominates. The Spring
Finds thee not less alive to her sweet force
Than yonder upstarts of the neighbouring wood,
So much thy juniors, who their birth received
Half a millennium since the date of thine. . . .

Other work Cowper has left us, translations of the eighth book of the "Æneid," of Ovid, of Horace. Such toil he found congenial; Horace stimulated him and called forth his best faculty of polished phrase-making. Nowhere does he lack grace and urbanity; and he has still to give us two immortal pieces, moved by sorrow and despair. But already he is descending into the vale, man of faith and infinite sorrow. A few more years in the shadow and the weary spirit shall be at rest.

VII

I AM glad you love Cowper," wrote old-world Charles Lamb to Coleridge. "I could forgive a man for not enjoying Milton, but I would not call that man my

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friend who should be offended with the divine chit-chat of Cowper." Southey's pronouncement, supported by Alexander Smith—"the best letter-writer in the English language"—has never been seriously challenged. Let the Dean pen his *chronique intime*, humorous and cynical, to Stella; Pope, whom our poet called a disgusting letter-writer, his budget with a view to public reading; Gray, his descriptions, splendid, sarcastic, and amusing; Horace Walpole lead us through his "brilliant, jigging, smirking Vanity Fair"; Lady Mary Montagu observe foreign manners and retail her fashionable gossip, not mealy mouthed; Chesterfield, with cold grace, inculcate intimately his ethical code on poor Philip Stanhope: not one of these is so utterly lacking in self-consciousness, so unaffected, so tender, so artless, so urbane, so droll, so naturally vivacious, so genuinely sad, as Cowper. Not for one moment did he dream that the accounts he penned of a thousand-and-one trifling happenings, from the receipt of a pot of scallops or the delinquencies of Mr. Morley in the matter of dispatching groceries, to an attack of toothache when dining with the Throckmortons, or the taking of soluble tartar in proper doses for indigestion, would outlast momentary interest, or that the confessions of a soul in agony would be read by other eyes than those for which they were immediately intended; not for one moment did he imagine he was penning a record that would render his personality as familiar to posterity

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as that of a most intimate friend. Not for one moment did he dream that with every line he wrote he was adding another touch to a portrait that will long survive when the last dim colour is faded from the canvases of Romney and Lawrence and Abbot. His horizon is limited and his range of vision narrow. His correspondents are men and women who, for the most part, made no figure in the great world—simple godly people whose very names, but for his association, would have been long since effaced on their mouldered tombstones. But interest attaches to the most trivial incident he chose to chronicle. He writes with distant dignity to a stranger, with droll humour to a friend, or in the sadness of a fixed despair, unfolding gradually his story. Poor distressful Cowper! with your twenty books and your Homer, your silver shoe-buckles and your green coat and yellow waistcoat, your periwig about which you wrote so amusedly, and your “gentleish toothpick case” for which you did not begrudge half a guinea—dull enough your quiet, sad life! When you talk nonsense it is clever nonsense which charms us unfailingly; when you are introspective and censorious we turn a deaf ear, remembering our own faults. There is endless pleasure in your society for those of us who steal away to these quiet places rarely.

Early he writes these jingling lines to Robert Lloyd¹ with ominous ring:

¹ Robert Lloyd, 1733-1764.

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'Tis not that I design to rob
Thee of thy birthright, gentle Bob,
For thou art born sole heir and single
Of dear Mat Prior's easy jingle ;
Not that I mean, while thus I knit
My threadbare sentiments together,
To show my genius or my wit,
When God and you know I have neither ;
Or such, as might be better shown
By letting poetry alone.

'Tis not with either of these views,
That I presume to address the Muse :
But to divert a fierce banditti
(Sworn foes to everything that's witty),
That, with a black infernal train,
Make cruel inroads on my brain,
And daily threaten to drive thence
My little garrison of sense :
The fierce banditti which I mean,
Are gloomy thoughts led on by Spleen. . . .¹

When the House of Lords affair occurred,
Cowper's fortunes tumbled about his ears and
his friends were swept away. But one remained,
solid Joseph Hill, and to him from his Hunt-
ingdon refuge the poet thus wrote of new
acquaintances :

" Oct. 25, 1765.

" Dear Joe,—I am afraid the month of
October has proved rather unfavourable to the
belle assemblée at Southampton, high winds
and continual rains being bitter enemies to
that agreeable lounge, which you and I are
equally fond of. I have very cordially betaken

¹ 1754. The earliest known letter is dated Durham, November 11, 1753.

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myself to my books and my fireside, and seldom leave them unless for exercise. I have added another family to the number of those I was acquainted with when you were here. Their name is Unwin—the most agreeable people imaginable; quite sociable, and as free from the ceremonious civility of country gentlefolks as any I have ever met with. They treat me more like a near relation than a stranger, and their house is always open to me. The old gentleman carries me to Cambridge in his chaise. He is a man of learning and good sense, and as simple as Parson Adams. His wife has a very uncommon understanding, has read much to excellent purpose, and is more polite than a duchess. The son, who belongs to Cambridge, is a most amiable young man, and the daughter quite of a piece with the rest of the family. They see but little company, which suits me exactly; go when I will, I find a house full of peace and cordiality in all its parts, and I am sure to hear no scandal, but such discourse instead of it as we are all better for. You remember Rousseau's description of an English morning; such are the mornings I spend with these good people; and the evenings differ from them in nothing, except that they are still more snug and quieter. Now I know them, I wonder that I liked Huntingdon so well before I knew them, and am apt to think I should find every place disagreeable that had not an Unwin belonging to it.

“ This incident convinces me of the truth of

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an observation I have often made, that when we circumscribe our estimate of all that is clever within the limits of our own acquaintance (which I at least have been always apt to do) we are guilty of a very uncharitable censure upon the rest of the world, and of a narrowness of thinking disgraceful to ourselves. Wapping and Redriff may contain some of the most amiable persons living, and such as one would go to Wapping and Redriff to make acquaintance with. You remember Mr. Gray's stanza :

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear ;
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

"Yours, dear Joe,
"W. C."

The following letter is an excellent piece of literary criticism ; for Cowper is no mean critic. He had broken with artifice in his own poetry, although numbering himself "among the warmest admirers of Mr. Pope as an original poet" ; and when the Dictator, with the Augustan pentameters sounding in his ears, hastily condemned the immortal cadences of "Paradise Lost," "anticipating the expressions of a century to come," he wrote indignantly to Unwin in defence of his master.

"Oct. 31, 1779.

"My dear Friend,—I wrote my last letter merely to inform you that I had nothing to say ;

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in answer to which you have said nothing. I admire the propriety of your conduct, though I am a loser by it. I will endeavour to say something now, and shall hope for something on return.

“ I have been well entertained with Johnson's biography, for which I thank you ; with one exception, and that a swingeing one, I think he has acquitted himself with his usual good sense and sufficiency. His treatment of Milton is unmerciful to the last degree. A pensioner is not likely to spare a republican ; and the Doctor, in order, I suppose, to convince his royal pa'tron of the sincerity of his monarchical principles, has belaboured that great poet's character with the most industrious cruelty. As a man, he has hardly left him the shadow of one good quality. Churlishness in his private life and a rancorous hatred of everything royal in his public are the two colours with which he has smeared all the canvas. If he had any virtues, they are not to be found in the Doctor's picture of him ; and it is well for Milton that some sourness in his temper is the only vice with which his memory has been charged ; it is evident enough that if his biographer could have discovered more, he would not have spared him. As a poet, he has treated him with severity enough, and has plucked one or two of the most beautiful feathers out of his Muse's wing and trampled them under his great foot. He has passed sentence of condemnation upon Lycidas, and has taken occasion, from that

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charming poem, to expose to ridicule (which is indeed ridiculous enough) the childish prattlement of pastoral compositions, as if *Lycidas* was the prototype and pattern of them all. The liveliness of the description, the sweetness of the numbers, the classical spirit of antiquity that prevails in it, go for nothing. I am convinced, by the way, that he has no ear for poetical numbers, or that it was stopped by prejudice against the harmony of Milton's. Was there ever anything so delightful as the music of the 'Paradise Lost'? It is like that of a fine organ; has the fullest and the deepest tones of majesty, with all the softness and elegance of the Dorian flute. Variety without end and never equalled, unless perhaps by Virgil. Yet the Doctor has little or nothing to say upon this copious theme, but talks something about the unfitness of the English language for blank verse, and how apt it is, in the mouth of some readers, to degenerate into declamation. Oh! I could thresh his old jacket till I made his pension jingle in his pocket.

"I could talk a good while longer, but I have no room. Our love attends you.

"Yours affectionately,

"W. C."

To the Rev. John Newton, recipient of some of his saddest pages, the poet when in spirits wrote in happiest vein. In June 1784 he had a charming paper on his hares in the "Gentleman's Magazine" which has been read by all

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the world. But had there been an unfortunate termination to the following trivial incident, so vividly described, it might never have been written.

"August 21, 1780.

"The following occurrence ought not to be passed over in silence in a place where so few notable ones are to be met with. Last Wednesday night, while we were at supper, between the hours of eight and nine, I heard an unusual noise in the back parlour, as if one of the hares was entangled and endeavouring to disengage herself. I was just going to rise from table when it ceased. In about five minutes a voice on the outside of the parlour door inquired if one of my hares had got away. I immediately rushed into the next room and found that my poor favourite Puss had made her escape. She had gnawed in sunder the strings of a lattice-work with which I thought I had sufficiently secured the window, and which I preferred to any other sort of blind because it admitted plenty of air. From thence I hastened to the kitchen, where I saw the redoubtable Thomas Freeman, who told me, that having seen her just after she had dropped into the street, he attempted to cover her with his hat, but she screamed out and leaped directly over his head. I then desired him to pursue as fast as possible, and added Richard Coleman to the chase, as being nimbler and carrying less weight than Thomas; not expecting to see her again, but

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desirous to learn, if possible, what became of her. In something less than an hour Richard returned, almost breathless, with the following account : That soon after he began to run, he left Tom behind him, and came in sight of a most numerous hunt of men, women, children, and dogs ; that he did his best to keep back the dogs, and presently outstripped the crowd, so that the race was at last disputed between himself and Puss. She ran right through the town and down the lane that leads to Dropshort ; a little before she came to the house he got the start and turned her ; she pushed for the town again, and soon after she entered it, sought shelter in Mr. Wagstaff's tanyard, adjoining to old Mr. Drake's. Sturges's harvest men were at supper, and saw her from the opposite side of the way. There she encountered the tan-pits full of water ; and while she was struggling out of one pit, and plunging into another, and almost drowned, one of the men drew her out by the ears and secured her. She was then well washed in a bucket to get the lime out of her coat, and brought home in a sack at ten o'clock.

"The frolic cost us four shillings, but you may believe we did not grudge a farthing of it. The poor creature received only a little hurt in one of her claws, and in one of her ears, and is now almost as well as ever.

"I do not call this an answer to your letter, but such as it is I send it, presuming upon that interest which I know you take in my minutest concerns, which I cannot express

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better than in the words of Terence a little varied—*Nihil mei a te alienum putas.*

"Yours, my dear friend,

"W. C."

The spirit of lawlessness stalking abroad, the quiet of Olney was rudely disturbed. There were threats of incendiarism in the air ; people went to bed apprehensively ; and Mrs. Unwin's nerves were jangled and out of order. As for himself, Cowper wrote stoutly, he was "impregnable to all such assaults." There was a side to the Olney character with which Newton was familiar to his cost ; and the following unlovely picture is drawn of the consequences of a minor conflagration that alarmed the town : "London never exhibited a scene of greater depredation, drunkenness, and riot. Everything was stolen that could be got at, and every drop of liquor drunk that was not guarded. Only one thief has yet been detected ; a woman of the name of J——, who was stopped by young Handscomb with an apron full of plunder. He was forced to strike her down before he could wrest it from her."¹ On November 17 he described the sequel, in excellent spirits and with keen appreciation of the ludicrous nature of the scene ; an account of his former parishioners which Newton must have read with amusement and disgust : "Since our conflagration here we have sent two women and a boy to the justice for depredation ; Sue Riviss for stealing a piece

¹ To Newton, November 3, 1783.

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of beef, which, in her excuse, she said she intended to take care of. This lady, whom you will remember, escaped for want of evidence; not that evidence was indeed wanting, but our men of Gotham judged it unnecessary to send it. With her went the woman I mentioned before, who, it seems, has made some sort of profession, but upon this occasion allowed herself a latitude of conduct rather inconsistent with it, having filled her apron with wearing apparel, which she likewise intended to take care of. She would have gone to the county gaol had Billy Raban, the baker's son, who prosecuted, insisted upon it; but he good-naturedly, though I think weakly, interposed in her favour and begged her off. The young gentleman who accompanied these fair ones is the junior son of Molly Boswell. He had stolen some ironwork, the property of Griggs, the butcher. Being convicted, he was ordered to be whipt, which operation he underwent at the cart's tail, from the stonehouse to the high arch and back again. He seemed to show great fortitude, but it was all an imposition upon the public. The beadle, who performed, had filled his left hand with red ochre, through which, after every stroke, he drew the lash of his whip, leaving the appearance of a wound upon the skin but in reality not hurting him at all. This being perceived by Mr. Constable Hinschcomb, who followed the beadle, he applied his cane, without any such management or precaution, to the shoulders of the

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too merciful executioner. The scene immediately became more interesting. The beadle could by no means be prevailed upon to strike hard, which provoked the constable to still harder ; and this double flogging continued till a lass of Silver-end, pitying the pitiful beadle thus suffering under the hands of the pitiless constable, joined the procession and, placing herself immediately behind the latter, seized him by his capillary club and, pulling him backwards by the same, slapt his face with a most Amazonian fury. This concatenation of events has taken up more of my paper than I intended it should, but I could not forbear to inform you how the beadle threshed the thief, the constable the beadle, and the lady the constable, and how the thief was the only person concerned who suffered nothing."

While dynasties tottered and republics struggled painfully to birth and the poet attended on Fame, Pitt became Premier, and William Grenville, his supporter, came down to Olney to solicit the votes of the honourable electors. Among others whom he canvassed was Whig Cowper, who, drawn for the moment into the political arena, had excellent opportunity for studying the plausible methods of certain parliamentary candidates. Mr. Grenville he found gentlemanly enough, although of the opposite side in politics ; but he knew also the exact value of that fervid hand-clasp, and chuckled amusedly when Lady Austen offered her cheek to my gentleman as if to the manner born, and

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Mrs. Unwin submitted demurely to the salute, and the maid blushing, before the grinning crowd at their champion's heels. There were regrettable incidents connected with this election: Mr. Throckmorton, canvassing for Lord Verney, the Foxite, was insulted by "wrong-headed" Nathan Sample, who had "much the same aversion to a Papist that some people have to a cat: rather an antipathy than a reasonable dislike"; and, before the contest was finished there were assaults on the Sheriff, the lawyers and the voters, and window-smashings and broken pates enough to keep the court busy for a week. This is the humorous, skilful old-world sketch from the poet's pencil: ¹

" March 29, 1784.

" My Dear Friend,—It being his Majesty's pleasure that I should yet have another opportunity to write before he dissolves the parliament, I avail myself of it with all possible alacrity. I thank you for your last, which was not the less welcome for coming, like an extraordinary gazette, at a time when it was not expected.

" As when the sea is uncommonly agitated, the water finds its way into creeks and holes of rocks which in its calmer state it never reaches, in like manner the effect of these turbulent times is felt even at Orchard Side, where in general we live as undisturbed by the political element as shrimps or cockles that have been accidentally

¹ To Newton.

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deposited in some hollow beyond the water mark by the usual dashing of the waves. We were sitting yesterday after dinner, the two ladies and myself, very composedly, and without the least apprehension of any such intrusion in our snug parlour, one lady knitting, the other netting, and the gentleman winding worsted when to our unspeakable surprise a mob appeared before the window; a smart rap was heard at the door, the boys halloo'd, and the maid announced Mr. Grenville. Puss was, unfortunately, let out of her box, so that the candidate, with all his good friends at his heels, was refused admittance at the grand entry and referred to the back door as the only possible way of approach.

"Candidates are creatures not very susceptible of affronts, and would rather, I suppose, climb in at a window than be absolutely excluded. In a minute the yard, the kitchen, and the parlour were filled. Mr. Grenville, advancing toward me, shook me by the hand with a degree of cordiality that was extremely seducing. As soon as he and as many more as could find chairs were seated, he began to open the intent of his visit. I told him I had no vote, for which he readily gave me credit. I assured him I had no influence, which he was not equally inclined to believe, and the less, no doubt, because Mr. Ashburner, the draper, addressing himself to me at this moment, informed me that I had a great deal. Supposing that I could not be possessed of such a treasure without knowing

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it, I ventured to confirm my first assertion by saying that if I had any I was utterly at a loss to imagine where it could be or wherein it consisted. Thus ended the conference. Mr. Grenville squeezed me by the hand again, kissed the ladies, and withdrew. He kissed likewise the maid in the kitchen, and seemed upon the whole a most loving, kissing, kind-hearted gentleman. He is very young, genteel, and handsome. He has a pair of very good eyes in his head, which, not being sufficient, as it should seem, for the many nice and difficult purposes of a senator, he has a third also, which he wore suspended by a riband from his button-hole. The boys halloo'd, the dogs barked, Puss scampered, the hero, with his long train of obsequious followers, withdrew. We made ourselves very merry with the adventure, and in a short time settled into our former tranquillity—never, probably, to be thus interrupted more. I thought myself, however, happy in being able to affirm truly that I had not that influence for which he sued, and which, had I been possessed of it, with my present views of the dispute between the Crown and the Commons, I must have refused him, for he is on the side of the former. It is comfortable to be of no consequence in a world where one cannot exercise any without disobliging somebody. The town, however, seems to be much at his service, and if he be equally successful throughout the country he will undoubtedly gain his election. Mr. Ashburner,

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perhaps, was a little mortified, because it was evident that I owed the honour of this visit to his misrepresentation of my importance. But had he thought proper to assure Mr. Grenville that I had three heads, I should not, I suppose, have been bound to produce them.

"Mr. Scott, who you say was so much admired in your pulpit, would be equally admired in his own, at least by all capable judges, were he not so apt to be angry with his congregation. This hurts him, and had he the understanding and eloquence of Paul himself, would still hurt him. He seldom, hardly ever indeed, preaches a gentle, well-tempered sermon, but I hear it highly commended; but warmth of temper, indulged to a degree that may be called scolding, defeats the end of preaching. It is a misapplication of his powers, while it also cripples and teases away his hearers. But he is a good man, and may perhaps outgrow it.

"Many thanks for the worsted, which is excellent. We are as well as a spring hardly less severe than the severest winter will give us leave to be. With our united love, we conclude ourselves yours and Mrs. Newton's affectionate and faithful

"W. C.

"M. U."

To Hill Cowper wrote on December 7, 1782 :
"How different is the complexion of your evenings and mine!—yours, spent amid the

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ceaseless hum that proceeds from the inside of fifty noisy and busy periwigs ; mine, by a domestic fireside, in a retreat as silent as retirement can make it ; where no noise is made but what we make for our own amusement." He heard at one time that the Peace of Gibraltar was abandoned, and again, that it was to be still continued ; rumours contradictory, but he had little curiosity and was no politician. He read his newspaper discussions on the American war, but felt himself more interested in the success of his early cucumbers than in any part of that great and important subject. The loss of America he regarded as the ruin of England, yet later he described that continent as " thirteen pitiful colonies." When Fox quoted his famous apostrophe to the Bastille in the House, it gave the poet vast pleasure :

Ye horrid towers, the abode of broken hearts,
Ye dungeons, and ye cages of despair,
That monarchs have supplied from age to age
With music such as suits their sovereign ears,
The sighs and groans of miserable men !
There's not an English heart that would not leap
To hear that ye were fallen at last ; to know
That even our enemies, so oft employed
In forging chains for us, themselves were free.

But he noted with dismay the excesses of the Revolution. " The French, who, like all lively folks, are extreme in everything, are such in their zeal for freedom ; and if it were possible to make so noble a cause ridiculous, their

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manner of promoting it could not fail to do so. Princes and peers reduced to plain gentlemanship, and gentles reduced to a level with their own lackeys, are excesses of which they will repent hereafter. Differences of rank and subordination are, I believe, of God's appointment, and consequently essential to the well-being of society ; but what we mean by fanaticism in religion is exactly that which animates their politics, and unless time should sober them, they will, after all, be an unhappy people." ¹ When, however, the Republic was definitely established, Cowper, staunch to his principles of liberty and religious equality, insisted that every nation must work out its own salvation. "All nations have a right to choose their own form of government, and the sovereignty of the people is a doctrine that evinces itself ; for whenever the people choose to be masters, they always are so, and none can hinder them. God grant that we may have no revolution here, but unless we have reform we certainly shall. . . . The hour has come when power founded on patronage and corrupt majorities must govern this land no longer. Concessions, too, must be made to Dissenters of every denomination. They have a right to them—a right to all the privileges of Englishmen, and, sooner or later, by fair means or by foul, they will have them." Cowper's political counsel was unheard in the world. He believed in progress, in liberty of religious worship, in

¹ To Lady Hesketh, July 7, 1790.

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the possibility of the redemption of humanity, and his religion colours his whole attitude. But, primarily, his concern was with the welfare of the soul.

When black melancholy gripped him, and the Olney fogs locked him within his four walls ; when the mists settled heavily on the meadows, and the muck-heaps scattered and hurled their dust down his throat as oft as he ventured into the street ; when the winds swirled and hooted in his crazy chimneys and the bitter frosts froze the fens ; when everything, peer where he might through his dull pane, seemed grown abominable—the poet, introspective and moody, tormented himself with the memory of his dream. When the haunting obsession entered the house and sat at board with him, he penned gloomy lines in his darkened parlour.

“ It is an alleviation of the woes even to an unenlightened man, that he can wish for death, and indulge a hope, at least, that in death he shall find deliverance. But, loaded as my life is with despair, I have no such comfort as would result from a supposed probability of better things to come when it once ended. For, more unhappy than the traveller with whom I set out, pass through what difficulties I may, through whatever dangers and afflictions, I am not a whit the nearer home, unless a dungeon may be called so. . . . The weather is an exact emblem of my mind in its present state. A thick fog envelopes everything, and at the same time it freezes intensely. You will tell me that

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this cold gloom will be succeeded by a cheerful spring, and endeavour to encourage me to hope for a spiritual change resembling it ; but it will be lost labour. Nature revives again ; but a soul once slain lives no more." ¹ Melancholy enough all this ; but hardly less so these lines, written on the eve of his fourth derangement :

" To Lady Hesketh.

" The Lodge,
" Jan. 18, 1787.

" I have been much indisposed with the fever that I told you had seized me ; my nights during the whole week may be said to have been almost sleepless. The consequence has been that, except the translation of about thirty lines at the conclusion of the thirteenth book, I have been forced to abandon Homer entirely. This was a sensible mortification to me, as you may suppose, and felt the more because, my spirits of course failing with my strength, I seemed to have peculiar need of my old amusement. It seemed hard, therefore, to be forced to resign it just when I wanted it most. But Homer's battles cannot be fought by a man who does not sleep well, and who has not some little degree of animation in the daytime. Last night, however, quite contrary to my expectations, the fever left me entirely, and I slept quietly, soundly, and long. If it please God that it return not, I shall soon find myself in a condition to proceed. I walk constantly—

¹ To Newton, January 13, 1784.

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that is to say, Mrs. Unwin and I together ; for at these times I keep her continually employed, and never suffer her to be absent from me many minutes. She gives me all her time and all her attention, and forgets that there is another object in the world.

“ Mrs. Carter thinks on the subject of dreams as everybody else does—that is to say, according to her own experience. She has had no extraordinary ones, and therefore accounts them only the ordinary operations of the fancy. Mine are of a texture that will not suffer me to ascribe them to so inadequate a cause, or to any cause but the operation of an exterior agency. I have a mind, my dear (and to you I will venture to boast of it), as free from superstition as any man living, neither do I give heed to dreams in general as predictive, though particular dreams I believe to be so. Some very sensible persons, and I suppose Mrs. Carter among them, will acknowledge that in old times God spoke by dreams, but affirm with much boldness that He has since ceased to do so. If you ask them, why? they answer, because He has now revealed His will in the Scripture, and there is no longer any need that He should instruct or admonish us by dreams. I grant that with respect to doctrines and precepts He has left us in want of nothing ; but has He thereby precluded Himself in any of the operations of His Providence? Surely not. It is perfectly a different consideration ; and the same need that there ever was of His interference

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in this way, there is still, and ever must be while man continues blind and fallible and a creature beset with dangers which he can neither foresee nor obviate. His operations, however, of this kind are, I allow, very rare ; and as to the generality of dreams, they are made of such stuff, and are in themselves so insignificant, that though I believe them all to be the manufacture of others, not our own, I account it not a farthing-matter who manufactures them. So much for dreams !

“ My fever is not yet gone, but sometimes seems to leave me. It is altogether of the nervous kind and attended, now and then, with much dejection.

“ A young gentleman called here yesterday who came six miles out of his way to see me. He was on a journey to London from Glasgow, having just left the University there. He came, I suppose, partly to satisfy his own curiosity, but chiefly, as it seemed, to bring me the thanks of some of the Scotch professors for my two volumes. His name is Rose, an Englishman. Your spirits being good, you will derive more pleasure from this incident than I can at present, therefore I send it.

“ Adieu, very affectionately,

“ W. C.”

Then madness descended ; and when reason was restored the poet fell to reading Savary's “ Travels into Egypt,” “ The Mémoires du Baron de Tott ” of “ Henri de Lorraine,” and

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Barclay's "Argenis." Correspondence was exchanged with his friends as health and spirits mended, but now Samuel Teedon had entered his life—long-winded Teedon, ready to borrow a guinea or an old pair of breeches, to receive his quarterage in advance¹ or attend to the welfare of his patron's soul. A melancholy reflection! that this fine spirit should have fallen into bondage, subservient to the mandates of his oracle: "I have now persevered in the punctual performance of the duty of prayer as long, and I believe longer, than the time which you specified. Whether any beneficial effect has followed I cannot say. My wakings in the night have certainly been somewhat less painful and terrible than they were, but this I cannot help ascribing to the agency of an anodyne which I have constantly used lately at bedtime. Of one thing, however, I am sure, which is, that I have had no spiritual anodyne vouchsafed to *me*. My nights have been somewhat less disturbed, my days have of course been such likewise; but a settled melancholy overclouds them all; nothing cheers me, nothing inspires me with hope. It is even miraculous in my own eyes that, always occupied as I am in the contemplation of the most distressing subjects, I am not absolutely incapacitated for the common offices of life.

"My purpose is to continue such prayer as I can make, although with all this reason to

¹ Teedon was by Cowper—thanks to some unknown friend—allowed £7 10s. per quarter. Wright, p. 587.

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conclude that it is not accepted, and though I have been more than once forbidden in my own apprehension by Him to whom it is addressed. You will tell me, that God never forbids anybody to pray, but, on the contrary, encourages all to do it. I answer—No. Some He does not encourage, and some He even forbids ; not by words perhaps, but by a secret negative found only in their experience." ¹

Once more his pathetic figure emerges in the following letter, now published for the first time.

" To Mrs. Cowper.

" Weston, Underwood,
" Jan. 21, 1789.

" My dear Cousin,—I beg you will never want encouragement to write to me. I am neither so great nor so good-for-nothing as to have forgotten your many kindnesses to me in years past, but I shall always rejoice to be informed of your well-being, and especially from yourself.

" I thank you for your congratulations on the subject of my annuity. I was bound to subsist at the expense of my friends ; in that and in that alone, God knows, resembling my Lord and Master. I shall ever, I hope, retain a grateful sense of the kindness of Lord Cowper to whom I was entirely a stranger ; but his bounty is a proof that he did not account me one.

" I share sincerely with you the pleasure you

¹ To Teedon, October 1792.

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receive from the continuation of Henry's emolument to your daughter and my good cousin Maria. His lordship could not have bestowed it on a more deserving woman or who would make a better use of it.

"My dear cousin, I dwell in a snug corner of a beautiful country, in which are many walks, some in groves and some in fields and some by river's side, with which you would be delighted. If you would give indeed a pleasure to myself and Mrs. Unwin, come and visit it. We are quiet folks and will give you your own way, be it what it will. And this I mention beforehand as an inducement which nobody need despise, even though it be offered to a person gentle as yourself and a promoter always of the convenience of others. With my best love to all who belong to you, I remain, my dear cousin,

"Most affectionately yours,

"WM. COWPER."

Let not this picture remain—the sad, listless figure from whose step the spring has departed, with yellow withered cheeks and the dull gleam of madness in the eye—but rather this impression of the graceful, urbane critic plying skilful pen :

"To the Rev. William Unwin.

"Jan 17, 1782.

"My dear William,—I am glad we agree in our opinion of King Critic, and the writers on whom he has bestowed his animadversions. It

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is a matter of indifference to me whether I think with the world at large or not, but I wish my friends to be of my mind. The same work will wear a different appearance in the eyes of the same man, according to the different views with which he reads it ; if merely for his amusement, his candour being in less danger of a twist from interest or prejudice, he is pleased with what is really pleasing and is not over-curious to discover a blemish, because the exercise of a minute exactness is not consistent with his purpose. But if he once becomes a critic by trade, the case is altered. He must then, at any rate, establish, if he can, an opinion in every mind of his uncommon discernment and his exquisite taste. This great end he can never accomplish by thinking in the track that has been beaten under the hoof of public judgment. He must endeavour to convince the world that their favourite authors have more faults than they are aware of, and such as they have never suspected. Having marked out a writer universally esteemed, whom he finds it for that very reason convenient to depreciate and traduce, he will overlook some of his beauties, he will faintly praise others, and in such a manner as to make thousands, more modest, though quite as judicious as himself, question whether they are beauties at all. Can there be stronger illustration of all that I have said than the severity of Johnson's remarks upon Prior ? —I might have said the injustice ? His reputation as an author who, with much labour

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indeed, but with admirable success, has embellished all his poems with the most charming ease, stood unshaken till Johnson thrust his head against it. And how does he attack him in this his principal fort? I cannot recollect his very words, but I am much mistaken indeed if my memory fails me with respect to the purport of them. 'His words,' he says, 'appear to be forced into their proper places; there indeed we find them, but find likewise that their arrangement has been the effect of constraint, and that without violence they would certainly have stood in a different order.' By your leave, most learned Doctor, this is the most disingenuous remark I ever met with, and would have come with a better grace from Curll or Dennis. Every man conversant with verse-writing knows, and knows by painful experience, that the familiar style is of all styles the most difficult to succeed in. To make verse speak the language of prose without being prosaic, to marshall the words of it in such an order as they might naturally take in falling from the lips of an extemporary speaker yet without meanness, harmoniously, elegantly, and without seeming to displace a syllable for the sake of the rhyme, is one of the most arduous tasks a poet can undertake. He that could accomplish this task was Prior; many have imitated his excellence in this particular, but the best copies have fallen far short of the original. And now to tell us, after we and our fathers have admired him for it so long, that

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he is an easy writer indeed, but that his ease has an air of stiffness in it, in short, that his ease is not ease but only something like it, what is it but a self-contradiction, an observation that grants what it is just going to deny and denies what it has just granted, in the same sentence and in the same breath? But I have filled the greatest part of my sheet with a very uninteresting subject. I will only say that as a nation we are not much indebted, in point of poetical credit, to this too sagacious and unmerciful judge, and that, for myself in particular, I have reason to rejoice that he entered upon and exhausted the labours of his office before my poor volume could possibly become an object of them. By the way, you cannot have a book at the time you mention; I have lived a fortnight or more in expectation of the last sheet, which is not yet arrived.

“ You have already furnished John’s memory with by far the greatest part of what a parent would wish to store it with. If all that is merely trivial, and all that has an immoral tendency, were expunged from our English poets, how would they shrink, and how would some of them completely vanish! I believe there are some of Dryden’s ‘ Fables ’ which he would find very entertaining; they are for the most part fine compositions, and not above his apprehension; but Dryden has written few things that are not blotted here and there with an unchaste allusion, so that you must pick

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his way for him lest he should tread in the dirt. You did not mention Milton's 'Allegro' and 'Penseroso,' which I remember being so charmed with when I was a boy that I was never weary of them. There are even passages in the paradisiacal part of the 'Paradise Lost' which he might study with advantage. And to teach him, as you can, to deliver some of the fine orations made in the Pandæmonium, and those between Satan, Ithuriel and Zephon, with emphasis, dignity, and propriety might be of great use to him hereafter. The sooner the ear is formed and the organs of speech are accustomed to the various inflections of the voice which the rehearsal of those passages demands, the better. I should think, too, that Thomson's 'Seasons' might afford him some useful lessons. At least they would have a tendency to give his mind an observing and a philosophical turn. I do not forget that he is but a child. But I remember that he is a child favoured with talents superior to his years. We were much pleased with his remarks on your almsgiving, and doubt not but it will be verified with respect to the two guineas you sent us, which have made four Christian people happy. Ships I have none, nor have I touched a pencil these three years; if ever I take it up again, which I rather suspect I shall not (the employment requiring stronger eyes than mine), it shall be at John's service.

"Yours, my dear friend,

"W. C."

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Litera scripta manet. Nor may we speak further on this theme, with Robert Lloyd's jingle in our ears :

The proverb still sticks closely by us
" *Nil dictum quod non dictum prius.*"

VIII

WHILE Cowper dallied with theme after theme which his friends suggested, finding no work for his hands to do, he was invited by his publisher to undertake an edition of Milton, which was to be on a more ambitious scale than any of its predecessors. Cowper was to be responsible for the annotations and the translation of the Latin and Italian poems ; Fuseli for the illustrations. Bagot and Hurdis were opposed to the idea, and the poet, unable to arrive at a definite decision and conscious of the difficulties of the task, consulted Teedon. The schoolmaster, who regarded himself as specially favoured by Providence, had already interpreted mysterious voices, and now in this matter wrestled earnestly in prayer. The answer being given that the poet was chosen for the work, he wrote to Johnson accepting the offer, and Milton proceeded. No sooner was the decision reached than Mrs. Unwin, dreading the idleness of winter, dispatched a letter of earnest thanks to the schoolmaster and desired the continuance of his prayers. Cowper translated the Latin and

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Italian poems, and for a time he worked strenuously. But his eyes gave him trouble ; he fell into low spirits and difficulties increased. He found himself unequal to the task of annotation, and the tormenting thought that he was neglecting the work drove him to distraction. He felt his genius crippled and numbed until the burden of his undertaking grew intolerable. "How often," he writes, "do I wish, in the course of every day, that I could be employed once more in poetry, and how often, of course, that the Miltonic trap had never caught me ! The year '92 shall stand chronicled in my remembrance as the most melancholy that I have ever known, except the few weeks that I spent at Eartham,¹ and such it has been principally because, being engaged to Milton, I felt myself no longer free for any other engagement. That ill-fated work, impracticable in itself, has made everything else impracticable." It eased his mind somewhat to hear from Johnson that he might choose his time over Milton ; but he had become incapable of concentrating his energies on that work. In despair at length he acknowledged defeat and returned to the revision of Homer.

There was, however, a further anxiety which preyed on the poet's mind and effectually hindered any progress being made with the Milton scheme. In January 1780 Mrs. Unwin had fallen on the ice-covered gravel, and lay helpless as a child for a whole fortnight. Her recovery

¹ The residence of William Hayley.

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was slow ; it was a month before she was able to descend to the poet's study. Throughout the year he makes ominous references to the state of her health, and although in a letter dated January 1789 he wrote in a spirit of resignation, " I have been so many years accustomed either to feel trouble or to expect it that habit has endued me with that sort of fortitude which I remember my old schoolmaster, Dr. Nicholl, used to call the passive valour of an ass," the accident caused him constant uneasiness. On December 21, 1791, he penned the melancholy tidings to Rose that Mrs. Unwin had been stricken with paralysis. Her speech and sight were affected. By January 1, however, she had partially recovered ; by the end of the month she was able to rejoin the poet in his study, and he recounted the progress of her convalescence in these words : " Her recovery has been extremely slow, and she is still feeble, but, I thank God, not so feeble but that I hope for her perfect restoration as the spring advances."

In March 1792 Sir John and Lady Throckmorton, as they now were, quitted the Hall for Bucklands, the family seat, on the death of Sir Robert, and Cowper felt their absence keenly. Of Sir John he wrote to Lady Hesketh : " Were I asked who in my judgment approaches nearest to him in all his amiable qualities and qualifications, I should certainly answer his brother George." Cowper now found consolation in the society of the latter, who continued to reside

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at the Hall and had assumed the name of Courtenay. "With him," he wrote, "as with his elder brother, I have always been on terms the most agreeable." In the following month he also made the acquaintance of the already mentioned William Hayley—about whom, Southey declared, everything was good except his poetry. Hayley resided at Eartham, in Sussex. The manner in which this acquaintance was brought about was as follows. Hayley had been commissioned by Boydell to write a Life for an edition of Milton, and the rumour was set afloat that he and Cowper were rivals. Hayley, acting on a generous impulse, dispatched a sonnet with which he enclosed a letter to Cowper—to whom he was quite unknown—in which he assured him that he was entirely ignorant that the latter was so engaged, and pointing out that the works were so entirely different that they would not clash. The packet was left at Johnson's, but, owing to some carelessness on his part, it was six weeks before it reached its destination. Hayley meanwhile, unaware that the missive had never been dispatched, suffered both "anxiety and mortification." As soon as Cowper received it, however, he replied and set Hayley's mind at rest. A visit to Weston being proposed, Cowper wrote: "It gives me the sincerest pleasure that I may hope to see you at Weston; for, as to any migrations of mine, they must, I fear, notwithstanding the joy I should feel in being a guest of yours, be still considered in the light

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of impossibilities." By May 1792 Hayley was the poet's guest at Weston, and he was "enchanted to find that the manners and conversation of Cowper resembled his poetry, charming by unaffected elegance and the graces of a benevolent spirit." He was presently to prove of incalculable service.

Returning one forenoon from their walk, the two friends were met at the door by Mr. Greatheed, who imparted the melancholy tidings that Mrs. Unwin had been seized with another paralytic attack of extreme gravity. She had lost the use of her right hand and arm and her speech was unintelligible. Hayley stood by the poet in his trial and earned undying gratitude. Before he left the patient was on the road to recovery, and a return visit to Eartham had been promised, in the hope that the change might prove beneficial.

In July Cowper had his portrait painted by Abbot, and by the end of the month Mrs. Unwin was so far recovered that the hundred-and-twenty-mile journey to Eartham could be faced. It was no light undertaking for the two recluses. To Mr. Bull the poet wrote, "Pray for us, my friend, that we may have a safe going and return. It is a tremendous exploit." On the way they met Rose at "The Mitre," and the General at Kingston, a stranger for thirty years ; and, at falling night on the third day, the poet, greatly marvelling at the tremendous height of the Sussex hills, found himself, together with his companion safe under Hayley's roof.

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Of Eartham he wrote enthusiastically : " Here we are as happy as it is in the power of terrestrial good to make us. It is almost a paradise in which we dwell, and our reception has been the kindest that it was possible for friendship and hospitality to contrive." He made the acquaintance of his correspondent Hurdis, in whom he found a resemblance to Unwin both in face and figure ; of Romney, and of Charlotte Smith, now engaged in writing " The Old Manor House," and was astonished by her powers of rapid composition. In the evenings they had pleasant little gatherings, when she read to the assembled circle " whatever the fertility of her fancy had produced in the course of a long studious morning." Cowper was in health and spirits, and Mrs. Unwin's condition gave ground for satisfaction. But his pen was mainly idle ; " like the man in the fable, who could leap nowhere well but at Rhodes," he seemed incapable of writing at all except at Weston. He dispatched, however, to Mrs. Courtenay Fop's " Epitaph," which runs as follows :

EPITAPH ON " FOP "

A Dog belonging to Lady Throckmorton

Though once a puppy, and though Fop by name,
Here moulders one whose bones some honour claim
No sycophant, although of spaniel race,
And though no hound, a martyr to the chase.

Ye squirrels, rabbits, leverets, rejoice !
Your haunts no longer echo to his voice ;

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This record of his fate exulting view,
He died worn out with vain pursuit of you.

"Yes"—the indignant shade of Fop replies—

"And worn with vain pursuit, man also dies !"

He also revised his Latin and Italian translations of Milton, and assisted Hayley with his rendering of Andreini's "Adamo"—worthless toil—but chiefly delighted in the library. At Hayley's request, Romney drew the poet's portrait in crayons. Cowper considered it an admirable likeness, and on his return to Weston he wrote his celebrated lines :

TO GEORGE ROMNEY, ESQ.

*On his picture of me in crayons, drawn at
Eartham in the sixty-first year of my age, and
in the months of August and September 1792.*

Romney, expert infallibly to trace
On chart or canvas, not the form alone
And semblance, but, however faintly shown,
The mind's impression too on every face,
With strokes that time ought never to erase ;
Thou hast so pencilled mine, that though I own
The subject worthless, I have never known
The artist shining with superior grace.
But this I mark—that symptoms none of woe
In thy incomparable work appear.
Well ! I am satisfied, it should be so,
Since, on maturer thought, the cause is clear :
For in my looks what sorrow couldst thou see,
When I was Hayley's guest, and sat to thee ?

But, pleasant as life at Eartham was, and kind
though his host might be, the poet began ere

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long to experience an intolerable longing for Weston. Although Mrs. Unwin had benefited by the change (she could, however, still neither read nor work), the prospect of the return journey was no less terrifying than had been the journey thither. After a six weeks' stay they set out with much trepidation, again meeting the General and Rose on the journey. The latter had invited the Welsh bard, Williams, to meet the poet at breakfast. But Cowper, despite the efforts of Rose to draw him into conversation, oppressed by the knowledge that he was in London, which held for him so many sad associations, remained silent during the meal. And, after a journey of depression and anxiety, the chaise deposited them all at the back door "in the dark and in a storm at eight at night."

The following letter, hitherto unpublished, contains a reference to Cowper's visit to Hayley.¹ It was on this occasion that Romney drew his famous sketch, which Blake idealized.

"To Mr. Joseph Hill.

"Weston,

"30 Nov., 1792.

"I find myself in want of many things but chiefly of money, and shall be obliged to you for a draft to such amount as my budget will supply. Among other extraordinaries incidental to the present year I have found it necessary to be my own dairyman and to purchase cows. For your great city devours every thing, so that

¹ Since the above lines were written the letter has appeared in one of the publications of the "Cowper Society."

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it is impossible any longer to find a pound of butter or cream to our tea in all the country.

"I have found that it is possible to change the air and the scene, and to derive no benefit from either. In the hope of it, however, both to Mrs. Unwin and myself, I journeyed last summer into Sussex, as probably you have heard. I was extremely low in spirits when I went and had been so for some time, and my poor fellow-traveller had been almost deprived of the use of her limbs by something like a paralytic stroke in the spring. There we spent six weeks, breathing the purest air, in the neighbourhood of the sea, and in a country most magnificent. But I returned the miserable thing I went, and poor Mrs. Unwin little better. My spirits, however, have improved within the last week or ten days, quite contrary to my expectation, for I assured myself that as we sunk deeper into the winter I should grow worse. December and January have long been my terrors, for when I have plunged into greater depths of melancholy than usual, these months have always been the fatal season. But no more of this. It will give me true pleasure to hear that you are well and cheerful and that Mrs. Hill is so likewise. I beg my compliments to her and remain

"Sincerely and affectionately yours,

"WM. COWPER."

The story of these last days, when the gloom lightened rarely, makes sad reading. Scarce had

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Cowper reached Weston when he was threatened with a return of his old malady, happily staved off. Mrs. Unwin was failing in mind and body. The poet, encompassed by terrors by day and night, bett'ought him of the schoolmaster, made him his confidant, threw open the secrets of his soul, and awaited the oracular interpretation. Such entries as the following from Teedon's Diary¹ tell their own story.

"Nov. 4.² I went over after dinner to Mad^m,³ met the Esq^r⁴ who gave a most dreadful acct of the state of his mind, &c. I went on to Mad^m, prayed, & came home at the time of the lessons read⁵.

"Nov. 7. Rec^d a Note from the Esq^r of sorrow.

"Nov. 11. . . . Writ to the Esq^r. Advised 7 days prayer, morn & eve from the example of Elijahs serv^t.

"Dec. 4. I rec^d a letter from the Esq^r again desiring to be prayed for respect^s Milton.

"Feb. 16.⁶ I went to Weston to the Esq^r⁷, found Jones called but did not see Mrs. U. The Esq^r related his dream of converse with Milton.

"May 18. I writ to the Esq^r in Ans^r. 'I will turn the flinty rock into a springing well,' & the Boy called for it when just done. The Lord give an especial Blessing. I went & found Mad^m going to walk with Mr. Johnson & Sam.⁸ I

¹ "The Diary of Samuel Teedon, October 17, 1781, to February 2, 1794." Edited by Th. Wright, 1902.

² 1792.

³ Mrs. Unwin.

⁴ Cowper.

⁵ 1793.

⁶ Sam Roberts, Cowper's man-servant.

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went likewise, drank tea with them. J. Higgins came in & Johnson & he went to walk. I asked Mad^m for a Guinea, & luckily Mr. Cowper came in for she had none, who gave it to me. . . ."

So the schoolmaster made his entries, throwing light on much that was dark; prescribing the time and manner of prayer, interpreting the haunting voices, and filling volumes with his rubbish. Alas! in his dotage the poet drank in the words that fell from the lips of his medium—a garrulous pedant in threadbare blue coat and black breeches and soiled waistcoat! Miserable story! ¹

His eyesight growing worse, he dared not write by candle-light, and despair settled once more. He was assailed by terrors unspeakable, and haunted by morbid dreams at night. Relief in prayer was denied him. "I dream in the night," he wrote to Teedon, "that God has rejected me finally and that all promises and all answers to prayer made for me are mere delusions. . . . I believe myself the only instance of a man to whom God will promise everything and perform nothing." Laudanum soothed

¹ From August 27, 1792, to February 2, 1794, a period of 801 days, no fewer than 277 recorded letters passed between Olney and Weston, namely:

From Cowper to Teedon	. . .	72 letters.
" Mrs. Unwin to Teedon	. . .	17 "
" Teedon to Cowper	. . .	126 "
" Teedon to Mrs. Unwin	. . .	62 "

It is rather sad to say there are good grounds for the supposition that the list is by no means a complete one. . . . In the period covered by the diary, some two and a half years, no fewer than ninety-two visits of Teedon to Cowper are recorded, being an average of about one every nine days—hence there was a letter or a visit every three or four days. Wright, "Life of Cowper," pp. 526 and 528.

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him, and he found momentary relief in garden-
ing and in the writing of occasional verses to
Hayley. He nursed Mrs. Unwin with tender-
ness and devotion, but, alas! the devoted
companion was grown sadly frail—a melancholy
figure, helpless in body, feeble in mind. It is
very pitiful to read those playful letters written
in agony of soul or these gentle verses, univer-
sally known, with their sad remembrance of
things past :

TO MARY

The twentieth year is well nigh past,
Since first our sky was overcast ;
Ah, would that this might be the last !
My Mary !

Thy spirits have a fainter flow,
I see thee daily weaker grow ;
'Twas my distress that brought thee low,
My Mary !

Thy needles, once a shining store,
For my sake restless heretofore,
Now rust disused, and shine no more,
My Mary !¹

For though thou gladly wouldst fulfil
The same kind office for me still,
Thy sight now seconds not thy will,
My Mary !

But well thou playedst the housewife's part,
And all thy threads with magic art
Have wound themselves about this heart,
My Mary !

¹ Cavilled at by Coleridge in "Anima Poetæ."

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Thy indistinct expressions seem
Like language uttered in a dream ;
Yet me they charm, whate'er the theme,
My Mary !

Thy silver locks, once auburn bright,
Are still more lovely in my sight
Than golden beams of orient light,
My Mary !

For, could I view nor them nor thee,
What sight worth seeing could I see ?
The sun would rise in vain for me,
My Mary !

Partakers of thy sad decline,
Thy hands their little force resign ;
Yet, gently prest, press gently mine,
My Mary !

Such feebleness of limbs thou provest,
That now at every step thou movest
Upheld by two, yet still thou lovest,
My Mary !

And still to love, though prest with ill,
In wintry age to feel no chill,
With me is to be lovely still,
My Mary !

But ah ! by constant heed I know,
How oft the sadness that I show
Transforms thy smiles to looks of woe,
My Mary !

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And should my future lot be cast
 With much resemblance of th^{is} ^{past,}
 Thy worn-out heart will brea^k ^{last,}
M^y ^{ary}!

Autumn of 1793.

In October 1793 Cowper received an invitation from Lord Spencer to meet Gibbon at Althorpe, which was declined. Hayley, visiting Weston in November, found Rose and Johnson there, and the two poets revised Homer and Milton together, Mrs. Unwin sitting by mumbling and chattering to herself in her corner. On November 24 he announced the suspension—the actual abandonment—of the Miltonic scheme to Hurdis, now filling the professorship of poetry at Oxford. Hayley, who spent over a fortnight at Weston, departed filled with apprehension for the condition of his host. On December 8 he wrote to Hayley: "It is a great relief to me that my Milton labours are suspended. I am now busy in transcribing the alterations of Homer, having finished the whole revisal. I must then write a new Preface, which done I shall endeavour immediately to descant on 'The Four Ages.'" Hayley was succeeded at Weston by Lady Hesketh, whom the poet had not seen for two years. The previous year she had been ill herself at Bath, during the time of her annual winter visit. Her presence cheered the poet greatly. She found a terrible state of affairs in the sad household. The helpless couple were at the mercy of poor, spoilt, extravagant, giddy, love-letter-

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writing Hannah Wilson, the poet's *protégée*, thoroughly spoilt by her boarding-school. Cowper spoke highly of her devotedness to Mrs. Unwin, during the illness following on the fall in the winter of 1788-89; but now she was ill-behaved, thankless, careless, her head filled with romantic nonsense, pluming and strutting, and giving herself airs in ill-becoming finery. Lady Hesketh entered vain protest; Weston was like to be ruined by her extravagance.

The New Year opened cheerlessly. Cowper, sunk in profoundest misery, sat during six days "still and silent as death," barely tasting food or drink, and all attempts to rouse him from his stupor were unavailing. At length Mrs. Unwin, now grown peevish and exacting, was made to understand the situation with difficulty. She observed that the morning was fine, and that she would fain attempt a walk. The poet rose gallantly and offered his arm—and this, as Southey remarks, "appears to have been the last instance in which her influence over him was exerted for his good." Johnson was with him for a time, but again the gloom had gathered. On April 8 Mr. Greatheed wrote to Hayley that the poet refused food and medicine, shunned society, and on these accounts Lady Hesketh dared not ask his company, rejoiced as she would be at his arrival. Scarce had Hayley read this letter, his kind heart overflowing, when he hastened to the side of his friend, while Lady Hesketh posted to London to consult the

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celebrated alienist Dr. Willis. To the latter, who had made his name by his skilful treatment of the king's insanity, Thurlow wrote, directing his attention to the poet. He came to Weston, examined the patient, prescribed, shook his professional head, and hurried back to town. The news from Lord Spencer arrived—alas! immaterial to the poet—that a pension of £300 a year had been conferred on him by the king—small thanks to Thurlow. Then warm-hearted Hayley must, to his own sorrow, away—so passing for ever out of our poet's life. It was a sad year for Lady Hesketh, fighting single-handed the battle; a year of unbroken anxiety, with the poet walking incessantly in study or bedchamber, dreading hourly his summons, afraid lest some one might take possession of his bed and prevent him lying down in it any more,¹ and Mrs. Unwin lingering on in living death. At length the situation became intolerable: her ladyship wrote to Johnson, now Reverend, who arrived and saw with his own eyes how matters stood. With great difficulty he persuaded Cowper and Mrs. Unwin to return to Norfolk with him for temporary change. When the hour of departure came, the poet, with sad foreboding, stole to his bedchamber and scrawled these lines heart-brokenly on the shutter:

Farewell, dear scenes, for ever closed to me;
Oh, for what sorrows must I now exchange ye.²

¹ Lady Hesketh to Mr. Johnson, May 3, 1795.

² Four additional lines are given by Wright, p. 638.

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And in vain regret for Weston passed the lucid intervals that remained. The first night of the journey was spent at Eaton Socon, where, walking through the churchyard in the moonlight, he cheerfully discussed the "Seasons" with Johnson. At North Tuddenham they rested for three weeks. Thence they moved to Mundesley, which was associated with early years, and where the monotonous sound of the breakers soothed him ; and finally, on October 7, to Dunham Lodge, near Swaffham. There the poet, owing to the weak state of his eyes, was compelled to remain for the most part indoors, when Johnson, constantly by his side, read aloud to him the novels of Richardson, the poor wandering mind vainly attempting to follow. Wakefield's criticism of certain passages of his Homer roused him. He sought them out and made certain corrections and began the revision of the whole of his version. But this was speedily abandoned. The voices dinned constantly in his ears : in vain a tube was inserted in the wall—a melancholy ruse—through which a comforting voice spoke ; nothing shook his settled conviction of irrevocable doom. In October 1796 the invalids were moved to Johnson's house at East Dereham.

Scarcely settled there, Mrs. Unwin sank rapidly, and on December 17 the sands had run through. Johnson broke the news to the poet, and later in the day, after fierce conflict with horrors, he entered the death-chamber. Gazing

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for a moment on the calm, still face, grief found utterance in one passionate cry, and he was led gently away. Hereafter of her no word.

On May 15, 1797, he wrote these despairing lines with altered handwriting to Lady Hesketh, now an invalid at Clifton: "To you once more, and too well I know why, I am under cruel necessity of writing. Every line that I have ever sent you I have believed, under the influence of infinite despair, the last that I should ever send. This I know to be so. Whatever be your condition, either now or hereafter, it is heavenly compared with mine even at this moment. It is unnecessary to add that this comes from the most miserable of beings, whom a terrible minute made such."

The revision of *Homer*, laid aside a year earlier, interested him apathetically, and henceforth, when sense pierced madness, it formed his only employment. Occasional visitors arrived, the Dowager Lady Spencer and Sir John Throckmorton, now grown greyer; Johnson read Gibbon aloud, and the poet's own works, "*John Gilpin*" excepted; Miss Perowne, taking Mrs. Unwin's place, soothed sad hours.

On March 8, 1799, *Homer* was revised, and three days later he commenced his Latin verses, "*Montes Glaciales*," which, at Miss Perowne's request, he translated into English. On March 20 he wrote the "*Castaway*" stanzas, founded on an incident recorded in "*Anson's Voyages*" which he had read years before.

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THE CASTAWAY

Obscurest night involved the sky,
The Atlantic billows roared,
When such a destined wretch as I,
Washed headlong from on board,
Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,
His floating home for ever left.

No braver chief could Albion boast
Than he with whom he went,
Nor ever ship left Albion's coast
With warmer wishes sent,
He loved them both, but both in vain,
Nor him beheld, nor her again.

Not long beneath the whelming brine,
Expert to swim, he lay ;
Nor soon he felt his strength decline,
Or courage die away ;
But waged with death a lasting strife,
Supported by despair of life.

He shouted : nor his friends had failed
To check the vessel's course,
But so the furious blast prevailed,
That, pitiless perforce,
They left their outcast mate behind,
And scudded still before the wind.

Some succour yet they could afford ;
And such as storms allow,
The cask, the coop, the floated chord,
Delayed not to bestow.
But he (they knew) nor ship nor shore,
Whate'er they gave, should visit more.

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Nor, cruel as it seemed, could he
 Their haste himself condemn,
 Aware that flight, in such a sea,
 Alone could rescue them ;
 Yet bitter felt it still to die
 Deserted, and his friends so nigh.

He long survives, who lives an hour
 In ocean, self upheld ;
 And so long he, with unspent power,
 His destiny repelled ;
 And ever, as the minutes flew,
 Entreated help, or cried—" Adieu ! "

At length, his transient respite past,
 His comrades, who before
 Had heard his voice in every blast,
 Could catch the sound no more :
 For then, by toil subdued, he drank
 The stifling wave, and then he sank.

No poet wept him ; but this page
 Of narrative sincere,
 That tells his name, his worth, his age,
 Is wet with Anson's tear :
 And tears by bards or heroes shed
 Alike immortalize the dead.

I therefore purpose not, or dream
 Descanting on his fate,
 To give the melancholy theme
 A more enduring date :
 But misery still delights to trace
 Its semblance in another's case.

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No voice divine the storm allayed,
No light propitious shone,
When, snatched from all effectual aid,
We perished, each alone :
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.

A few more fragments we have from his pen—translations of Greek and Latin epigrams ; and, in January 1800 he rendered certain of Gay's " Fables " into Latin verse. A mistranslation of Homer he corrected at Hayley's request, his last lines.¹ Dropsy developed and the end approached rapidly. To Dr. Lubbock of Norwich, who inquired one day how he felt, he replied, " I feel unutterable despair." So he sank. Rose visited him, but illness or the presence of death held other friends. Johnson spoke words of Christian hope to the sufferer, but he went out in despair as one entering the horror of infinite darkness. On April 25, 1800, the weary, storm-tossed soul had passed.

Cowper lies buried in Dereham Church, by the side of Mrs. Unwin. Lady Hesketh erected a monument to him, for which Hayley supplied the following inscription :

IN MEMORY OF

WILLIAM COWPER, Esq.,

Born in Hertfordshire, 1731. Buried in this Church, 1800.

Ye, who with warmth the public triumph feel
Of talents, dignified by sacred zeal,

¹ Wright, p. 655.

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Here, to devotion's bard devoutly just,
 Pay your fond tribute due to Cowper's dust !
 England, exulting in his spotless fame,
 Ranks with her dearest sons his favourite name :
 Sense, fancy, wit, suffice not all to raise
 So clear a title to affection's praise :
 His highest honours to the heart belong ;
 His virtues form'd the magic of his song.

A secondary position Cowper occupies among the poets. Blake declared the "Letters" ought to be printed in letters of gold. Carlyle spoke of the great love and respect he had entertained for him ever since his young years ; he was the author Constable preferred to almost any other.

Yet much of his work is dull, mediocre ; work such as Pye would have given us, of transient interest. The pathos of his story, the charm of his personality, the warm affection he inspires, must not blind the critic to his very real limitations as a poet. To some, the music of his harpsichord is tuneless, without swell and harmony, his range limited, his melodies old-fashioned, his themes dull. But it has pleased us to move for a space in the dim candle-light of that faded world of his, to hear its far voices, to join in its faint laughter, to share its dead griefs, to understand its simple faith. For those who live therein are very real to us. And sufficient if this fragile singer, during our intimacy, has lightened the burden of lonely hours and soothed the bitterness of life's journey

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with healing touch. For so might these lines
have been his prayer :

That I might leave
Some monument behind me, which pure hearts
Should reverence.

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For the Olney period vide "Diary of Samuel Teedon," edited by T. Wright, 1902. For the latest biographical material consult "Cowper in London"

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